

**BILLIE
IMPETT
AND
DORIS**

BY
CAPTAIN
EUSTACE AINSWORTH

151

Thos Stewart.

Billie Impett and Doris

By the same Author

**SECOND LIEUTENANT
BILLIE IMPETT AND
HIS ORDERLY**

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By

Captain Eustace Ainsworth

*Author of "Second Lieutenant Billie Impett and his Orderly"
etc.*

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*Billie Impett and Doris**Contents*

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Chapter I

Blighty

OVER in France Captain Hoyle had been fond of saying that if the subalterns of the Nth Field Company R.E. would abide by the golden rule, never to go about alone, they would when hit be packed safely off to a lovely hospital in England and proceed to marry their nurse, which advice, short of the last item, Second Lieutenant Billie Impett, R.E., had found to be good and true.

From the moment when, gradually losing consciousness from a neatly perforated shoulder blade, he had blown his whistle and heard four German howitzers rent to Eternity, till the day of his discharge from a London hospital, things had been just a period of rest.

It had been nice to look forward to visitors and nice to say good-bye when they left, nice to see the sweet smile of a noiseless nurse and

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nice to go to bed when he was told and not get up till he was allowed. In fact it was all nice.

Then when at last the day came for his discharge on sick furlough that was nicest of all, in spite of a dreadful moment when his nurse kissed him as no one was looking, and the long-looked-forward-to journey home was the crowning delight.

After dinner his mother said, "Don't stay too long with your father, I want to see something of you, and you mustn't be too late to bed."

Billie promised.

"And what's the feeling out there?" Mr. Impett asked. "Optimistic on the whole, I suppose?"

"Well, you see, Dad," Billie answered, "you don't have feelings out there if you are below the rank of brigade-major, and even then I fancy your feelings are all about the brigadier. My feelings were all about what you and mother and Kitty were doing, and I

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gathered from your letters that yours were all about me."

"But the men I mean: you always speak so well of them. Still the same as ever, I suppose? Still keen and confident? No talk of a premature peace, eh?"

Billie lit a cigarette and lay back in his chair. "The men don't talk about peace," he said, "because it seems so remote, almost impossible. When we were all at peace we couldn't picture war; when you are out there you can't imagine peace; so you don't bother your head thinking about it."

Mr. Impett was a little disappointed. He had looked forward to walking into his club primed with prophecies and facts that would be infallible in their authority. "My son who has just returned from the Front was telling me last night——" and now Billie was not going to commit himself.

"Well, of course," he went on, "I can understand that, but anyway you fellows don't talk of a premature peace, that's one thing, and after all you are the men most

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immediately interested. If you don't cry out surely we can stick it a bit longer."

"Yes, Dad," Billie said drily, "I think the people at home can stick it a bit longer. They are standing it very well. But don't run away with the idea that we don't want peace. No one but a lunatic would want anything else: it isn't our job, that's all. Some day we shall be told that peace has been declared and someone will say, 'Thank God!' and send an orderly out to find a drink. Next day it will be just the same as ever, only it will be peace, and everyone will expect leave, and no one will get it, and we shall all be fed up to the teeth."

"Don't you think there will be great rejoicings?" Mr. Impett asked.

"I think the people here will go off their heads," Billie answered, "and the men in France will just lie down and go to sleep, physically and mentally, for a week. Then they will want to come home at once, will find that they can't, and it will be then that we shall have the devil's own job handling

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them. I think I'll take some grass seed back with me to sow on the tops of shell-holes when No. 4 Section has filled them and levelled everything off like a lawn. That should keep them occupied for a year or two."

Mr. Impett grunted. Somehow the long-desired conversation was a failure. He remembered the night Billie had left for France, remembered Mrs. Impett's instructions and his own little well-meant lecture that Billie the boy had taken so well and earnestly, and here, after only ten months absence, was Billie the man talking the most uncomfortable common sense.

"Well, that will keep," he said, getting up. "Your mother wants to speak to you and you mustn't be late to bed." Then the old familiar words took him back to the boy Billie and he laughed. "That's what I've been saying for years, isn't it? Well, I'm very glad to see you anyway!"

Billie took the old man's arm with a squeeze. "I'm jolly glad to see you and Mother too, Dad, but it isn't very easy to speak about, is

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it ? And I like just the old ways, and Mother says I can sleep in the dressing-room because that's the room I always thought of 'out there.' Somehow it was never my real room that I saw, but the little bed round the corner of the wardrobe, with your door open so that I could yell out for Mother if I was frightened."

Mr. Impett, feeling extremely unreliable as to his voice, said, " Yes, yes, just run along into the drawing-room to your mother. You mustn't be late to bed ! "

Next day the old gentleman went into his Club for lunch with almost every feeling of authority that he had pictured himself possessing, and stood listening to the various opinions of his friends on the War while a waiter brought a gin and bitters.

" I hear your lad's back, Impett," someone said. " Is he all right again ? "

Three other elderly men who had been wondering why Haig " didn't turn their flank at the coast," stopped talking and sidled secretly toward Mr. Impett.

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“ Yes,” he said. “ They’ve let him out of hospital. Of course he isn’t up to much. Shot through the shoulder, you know ; complications and so on ; but he’s just the same as ever ! ”

“ Not changed a bit, I suppose,” someone said, and Mr. Impett drank his gin and bitters and answered, “ No. Older, of course, and all that. But just the same.”

“ And what’s his opinion about things ? ” the other asked, and the little group of men concentrated as iron filings creep to a magnet on a shaken paper.

“ Oh, well, of course he has to be very careful,” Mr. Impett answered, waving a hand mysteriously, “ and even some of the things he tells me are in confidence, you understand, but generally speaking I can say that I went to bed satisfied. Things are going all right ! ”

As for Billie, when he was allowed to get up, which was about ten o’clock, he just slipped an arm round his sister and said, “ Let’s go into the store-room and eat cherries.”

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That again was one of the things that he had dreamed of. There was a rather fat-looking pot-jar with a rather loose pot-lid, and, years before, Billie had made the mistake of calling preserved cherries "sultanas," because that was the name on the jar.

"I suppose you've seen lots of men killed," Kitty Impett said admiringly from her seat on the flour bin, and Billie said, "Have a cherry and talk about something nice!"

"But you have, haven't you, Bill! Do just say yes, you've seen heaps, and walked on them and all that sort of thing."

"You nasty little pig!" Billie laughed. "Now I'll answer that question! Yes, I've seen heaps of men killed and I have a list of their home addresses in my note-book, and I'm going to see everyone of their mothers or wives before I go out again!"

Kitty frowned. "I don't mean *our* men, Bill," she said impatiently, "I mean Germans!"

"Oh, I see," Billie answered, "but what difference does it make? It's just as horrid

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to have to walk up a trench paved three deep with wounded Germans as it would be if they were English, and it makes you sick just as quickly ! ”

“ Have you ever been really sick ? ” Kitty asked persuasively, and Mrs. Impett, who, had missed the storeroom key, said, “ He will be if he eats many more of those cherries. What are you two doing this afternoon ? ”

Billie popped the lid on the jar and said, “ Lounge about.”

“ You wouldn’t like to go to the Vicarage to tea ? ”

“ I’m not very strong,” Billie answered. “ They told me I was to keep quiet. May I lounge, please ? ”

“ It’s not at all warm,” Mrs. Impett said doubtfully, as she went off with a bottle of vinegar, “ If you go out you must wrap up well. Don’t stand about, dear, will you ? And lock the storeroom door when you come out.”

But they did not lounge after all because Kitty wanted to go over to the village and

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said there was a bull in the field, and would Billie please come with her ?

Now, whatever ideas Billie had about taking chances on the sodden ground east of Ypres, he had no desire whatever to take chances with a bull, and said so. That is the sort of thing that is not easy to explain, but as Billie had no intention of changing his mind they had to go round by the road.

“ Dick Barrett goes across regularly,” Kitty said, “ and he doesn’t mind the bull a bit. He took me across last Sunday.”

“ Good man ! ” Billie said. “ That’s jolly plucky of him. I wouldn’t go near the brute ! ”

“ But you aren’t *frightened* of it, Bill ? ” Kitty asked rather fearfully, “ not really *afraid* I mean ? ”

“ As a matter of fact I’m scared to death of the brute. Whatever could I do if it came after us ? ”

Kitty walked on in uncomfortable silence. Things were not as they should be. For months she had held up her Billie as the incarnation of bravery, and here he was in the

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flesh once more and afraid of a bull ! Then it occurred to her that he was only just out of hospital and she blushed. Of course, that accounted for it and she took his arm.

“ Were they nice to you in Hospital ? ” she asked. “ And what was your nurse like ? ”

“ Not half as nice as you ! ” Billie answered evasively, “ but good enough. I haven’t seen Dick Barrett for quite a long time. I must look him up. He was always a decent fellow and if he’s been escorting you past furious bulls I would like to meet him again.”

“ I wouldn’t bother,” Kitty said. “ He was up before the Tribunal the other day and got another three months’ exemption. Dad says it’s a disgrace.”

“ Oh ! I don’t know about that,” Billie replied, “ you see someone must stay at home and look after things and Dick has quite a lot on his hands.”

“ Well, it’s funny of you to talk like that,” Kitty answered, “ after being shot and shelled and trampled on, and one thing and another.

Blighty

I should have thought you would have been wild about him. Oh! look, there's Doris Seabrook! Let's catch her up."

"Who is she?" Billie asked doubtfully. "I'm not going to hurry. Wonder if she's any relation to D. S. Seabrook of the Royal Scots?"

"I don't know," Kitty answered, "but she has a brother out there and I believe he's in a Scotch Regiment. I'll run on and stop her."

"What a funny thing!" Doris Seabrook said a little later, as they sat on a bank, "only this morning I had a letter from my brother in France telling me to look out for you when he heard that I was staying down here!"

Billie laughed and said, "That's awfully kind of him. I shouldn't have thought he would have remembered me."

"Oh! but he does," Doris said with emphasis, "he often used to write about you even before you were wounded!"

Kitty stared in astonishment. "You never told us," she said reproachfully. "Do you

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mean Donald has been writing to you about Bill ? ”

“ Yes, often. I didn’t tell you because I knew you heard from your brother regularly.”

Billie said, “ Oh ! look here ! There’s some mystery about this. All I ever knew of your brother was when his men formed our working parties at night. I knew him that way but upon my soul I should hardly know him by sight. I could tell his voice out of a hundred, but you see it’s always been dark when we’ve been working together.”

“ Yes, I know it has,” Doris replied quietly. “ You see I happen to know all about it.”

“ May I see what he said ? ” Kitty asked, and Doris said, “ Perhaps. I will select the worst and show it to your brother to-morrow. If he says you can see it you may.”

“ The worst ! ” Kitty said, “ I do wish you wouldn’t be so mysterious. Don’t you, Bill ? ”

But Billie was beginning to see daylight.

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Not clearly or very close at hand, but a glimmer of the truth was reddening his cheeks a little, and as Doris caught his eye and saw the deepening colour she knew that he had guessed.

“ I don’t quite think your brother meant me to see his letters to you,” he said at last, “ and I think perhaps you had better not show them to me. When a man writes to his sister about another man I’m sure he doesn’t mean the other fellow to see what he writes. You see he could tell him what he wanted without such a roundabout process, couldn’t he ? ”

“ Yes,” Doris remarked, “ I suppose he could, but as it happens he wouldn’t. If you and Kitty will come to tea to-morrow I will read you a few choice extracts. You don’t know this bad brother of yours, my dear,” she added to Kitty. “ Just you wait till you hear what sort of a life he leads in France ! ”

Next afternoon, however, Kitty having developed a temperature, which Mrs. Impett

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at once diagnosed as the result of "standing about," Billie, who was quite justifiably curious, walked the half-mile up the road by himself for information.

"I've got them all in order of date," Doris said in a most business-like manner. "All those with a red tick on the top right-hand corner have some reference to 'that Sapper Officer, Impett,' so I can turn them up in a second."

"By jove," Billie said admiringly, "that's a splendid idea; but are you sure your brother would like it? I'm quite content to sit here and talk, aren't you?"

"The first reference," Doris went on calmly, "says, 'the Sappers have got a new Officer, in place of Williams killed with a wiring-party, but you would not know Williams. The new man's name is Impett. No one believed it for a long time but he says that's his father's name so I suppose it's true. Haven't met him yet but they say'—er—and so on, you know," Doris said rather hastily turning over the page.

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"I don't know," Billie protested, "please tell me."

"No, I won't tell you that one, it's silly. Donald is a bit of an ass at times."

Billie said, "I'm awfully sorry but if I don't hear that one I won't hear any of the others."

"Nonsense!" Doris answered. "You must."

Billie, who hated what his Major used to call 'half a tale,' got up and looked down at the girl leaning back in a deep chair, the bunch of letters in her hand. "It's that one or none, Miss Seabrook!" he said. "Bread and jam is very good food but I don't like the jam alone." Then, as the girl looked vexed, "A little bread, please, miss," he said persuasively, "and some jam."

Doris kicked a foot and read on with slow emphasis, "Haven't met him yet but they say he is very raw!"

"Good! Is that all?"

Doris hesitated. "No it's not all," she said, "he goes on—er—'they say he is very

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obstinate and self-willed. Must have been spoiled at home. Always wants his own way and—er—thinks a great deal of himself.' ”

Billie said nothing, but after a moment sat down again in his chair. Twice he glanced at the girl opposite, and the second time came to the conclusion that she was rather nice-looking and wondered where he had seen her before.

Then, as he blew a cloud of smoke that ‘mushroomed’ and moved slowly to one side in a draught, he thought of a very sedate old naval gun that fired just like that once upon a time at the back of Carnoy. Carnoy! Mametz! Trones Wood! Guillemont! Longueval and the unburied dead! And here he was talking nonsense about bread and jam. There was another bit too, the place where he had lost his way and left the wounded men to shift for themselves till——

“What’s the matter!” Doris asked in alarm, and Billie, finding himself unexpectedly on his feet with a queer feeling in the skin of

Blighly

his face that told him he was deadly white, said, "Oh! nothing. I just thought of something, that's all!"

"Won't you tell me what it is?"

Billie took a good look at her and said, "I really believe that some day I will."

Now he knew when he had seen her before! Now he knew why for the first time in his life he had dreamt of a girl he hardly knew. She was his "Trench Girl." Not absolutely the same, of course, not with the almost wicked look of Kirchners "Scout," the little figure in shorts with a French water-bottle on her hip, but oh! so very like!

It was the trench where he had left the wounded that had brought it all back to his mind, his sleep on the firestep from sheer exhaustion, the groans of the stricken like the confused noise of a city in the distance, and then the vision to a tired brain of Kirchners "Scout" leading the way to safety! It was all he had to trust to, he remembered, a flimsy chance to stake a life on, but the little figure that had hung before him in the rough

Blighty

Mess had become so close a pal that as an omen it was good enough.

Nor had that been either the first or last time. That hellish moment near Longueval, for instance, where a trench had to be lengthened up to a cross-roads under heavy shell fire and Captain Hoyle had said, "Do your best, Impett, the Division wants it finished before dawn." There again the "Scout" in a moment of daze from a too-near shell burst, had come to Billie's excited imagination, gone bustling down the half-made work, the little water-bottle swinging loose on her hip, and Billie had carried on.

Then the Hun attempt to recapture the Howitzers, the wound in his shoulder, Hospital, operations, visions of the "Scout" mixed up with the quiet nurse and then—— then Doris Seabrook put a decanter of brandy on the little table, with some soda water, and said, "Carry on, old man, you'll be all right in a minute!"

Chapter II

Mrs. Stevens

ONCE upon a time Billie lost an orderly in Flanders, shot through the neck by a sniper, and ever after carried about with him in a notebook the address of the dead man's Mother, which read "Mrs. Stevens, 69 Bolton Road, Birkenhead," so that after being at home for a few days this little matter began to weigh on his mind. What made matters worse was that in Stevens' last moments he had mistaken Billie for his Mother and spoken rather openly. Also there was an imitation silver pencil-case, which had not been returned with the dead man's belongings, as a further reminder.

So after some ineffectual protests from Mrs. Impett, Billie found himself one afternoon asking a policeman the way to Bolton Road and walking through avenues of soul-destroying houses till he came to a pair of large

Mrs. Stevens

gates on which was painted "Cammell-Laird."

So there was such a place after all, he thought. Night after night in France he had heard the name from Sappers of his Company and here it was. That and "Lever Brothers" he remembered seemed the two sources of supply in the early days of the War. So Billie rang the bell of Number 69 and wondered what he was going to say.

A middle-aged woman who came to the door said, "What do you want?" in a rather apprehensive tone, wiping her hands on her apron, and Billie said, automatically, "Yes, you're just like him."

By that time Mrs. Stevens had realised that she was speaking to a Sapper Officer and, after a little fumbling, pulled a letter out of a secret pocket in her skirt.

"Is it about him?" she asked, beginning to take the letter from its envelope, and Billie nodded. It was not a guess. The whole thing ran continuously. The dirty, worn envelope, the look on the woman's face, so

Mrs. Stevens

like Sapper Stevens' as he had lain dying by that fatal gap in the hedge, and the imitation silver pencil-case that he had unconsciously taken from his pocket ; it all fitted in.

The woman swung the door back and stood aside. "It's washing day," she said, "and I'm a bit upset, but the parlour's straight."

Billie took his cap off and found himself piloted into the "parlour," that abomination of many working homes.

"So you were with our Joe when he died, were you ? Well, I know you'd come somehow. Mrs. Smethurst said you'd forget, but I knew you'd come. Of course you might 'ave got shot but I knew you'd come somehow. We're 'aving it very fine now after all that rain. I was saying only yesterday to Mrs. Smethurst, I said, 'It's set fair now, I think.'"

Billie looked round the room and then out of the window where a glimpse of an exactly similar house seen through the lace curtains, drove his eyes back to Mrs. Stevens. This

Mrs. Stevens

was not at all the reception or the talk he had expected. He remembered Sapper Stevens' most loving words when he thought Billie was his Mother, remembered a difference of opinion the dying man had referred to, a little quarrel that for a week had led to strained relations, and began to wonder if Mrs. Stevens was worth the worry she had caused.

The room was appallingly damp and cold, and, thinking quickly, it struck Billie that if this plain-looking woman was in the kitchen she might thaw. She had to say something before he went. It was impossible to think of "1021 Sapper Stevens J" lying away near Vierstraate and never a word of affection from his Mother.

"Do you know, Mrs. Stevens," he said, "I feel cold. You see I've not been long out of Hospital. May I sit by the kitchen fire for a bit?"

"Well," Mrs. Stevens said, "it's not the place for an officer, isn't the kitchen!"

So Billie got up from his chair, put an arm

Mrs. Stevens

round the rather horrified Mrs. Stevens, and said, "Come on! Let's have a chat. I'm never comfortable in the front room."

They had to walk rather close to pass the spot where the stairs narrowed the passage and Billie gave the old lady's arm a good squeeze. "We'll have a cup of tea and just a word or two, and then I must be off."

Mrs. Stevens said nothing in reply. Her mind went back to the letter from "Our Joe," written a month before he was hit, and it was all about Lieut. Impett. "Lieut. Impett was a gentleman! He wasn't afraid of nothing, and he was that kind!" and so on, and now here was Mr. Impett who wanted to have tea in the kitchen and sit by the fire! It was not a bit like her idea of an Officer, but she was beginning to understand Joe's letter.

"What a lovely room," Billie said, as he manœuvred round a clothes-horse carrying all the washing of a week. "Where do you keep the tea-pot? I love making tea."

Mrs. Stevens

Mrs. Stevens was still silent but going to a cupboard she brought out an old brown tea-pot with a chipped spout.

"I'll have this boiling in a minute," Billie said, moving the kettle from the hob to the fire. "You cut the bread and butter."

Mrs. Stevens went out and Billie sat in a rocking-chair with a wool cover to its back, and waited. After a few minutes the kettle began to boil and he went out through the scullery door to find its owner.

There was a very small room with a concrete floor, a sink with a stocking tied over the cold tap to stop it splashing, and sitting on a little stool was Mrs. Stevens. Her apron was over her face and she rocked slowly to and fro without a sound. So Billie drew back into the kitchen and wondered what to do next.

"The kettle's boiling," he called out cheerfully after a few minutes, "where's the tea kept?" but as there was no answer he

Mrs. Stevens

watched the steam puffing from the kettle's spout and listened.

After a while, hearing a step, he turned towards the scullery door and saw Mrs. Stevens. She had been crying, of course, and so looked wretched, but a sort of illumination made of grouped wrinkles; wide open eyes, and the smile that God made specially for Mothers, gave him every warning, so that as the old lady put two overworked arms round his neck, Billie just gave her a great hug and said, "That's all right!"

"He was a good lad, was Joe," Mrs. Stevens sobbed reminiscently over Billie's shoulder, and Billie said, "Look here, Mother, I want some tea."

Mrs. Stevens let go gradually and, after wiping her eyes once more with her apron, said, "Bless you!" and Billie was delighted to notice the absence of the "Sir."

"I don't like it very strong," Billie said. "Don't know how you like yours. Just medium, I expect. Sugar? None at all? Right! Now I'm going to sit on the fender

Mrs. Stevens

because I'm cold and you'll sit here because I want you to. That's right. Now how's everything in Birkenhead ? ”

Mrs. Stevens took a drink of tea, lifted her head with a little jerk, and said, “ Things might be much worse. When I heard about Joe I couldn't sleep. I didn't sleep for nigh a week and had to work by day. Then I got so tired I couldn't keep awake and I just waited for you. I knew you'd come, they said you'd forget.”

“ By the way,” Billie said, “ Joe gave me this for you,” and he brought out the imitation silver pencil-case. It was not true, Sapper Stevens had been far too hard hit to make bequests in his last moments, but Billie risked a lie in a good cause.

“ Did he for sure ! ” Mrs. Stevens exclaimed. “ Now, fancy that ! ” and taking the pencil she slipped it unlooked at into the same mysterious pocket from which she had taken the letter. When no one was by she would examine it, dote over it and treasure it. Treasure and worship it for ever.

Mrs. Stevens

“Have you seen his photo?” she asked.

Billie said, “No, but I remember him well.” He had no desire to see what he felt sure would be a travesty of that hard brown face that had stared so contemptuously across Flanders.

“I’ve got it in the parlour,” Mrs. Stevens added, “I wonder you didn’t see it when you were there.” So Billie, who was wondering how he was going to catch his train, went once more into the mausoleum of a front room and shuddered.

“It’s just like him,” Mrs. Stevens remarked, handing Billie a villainous portrait of what looked like an overfed grocer’s assistant in uniform, and Billie said, “Isn’t it!”

“Won’t you sit down, sir?” Mrs. Stevens asked, and Billie, protesting that he really must go, sat on the edge of a horse-hair sofa and stroked his moustache. Things seemed to be back at the beginning, he thought.

“He was a regular attender at chapel,” the

Mrs. Stevens

old lady went on, "and was spoke well of by all. The Minister was asking about him only the other day. 'Where was he killed?' he says, and I says, 'France,' and he says, 'Dear, dear!' just like that!"

Then Billie saw the trouble. It was the parlour. The clock in the glass case, the stuffed seagull on a fretwork bracket, old Stevens' masonic apron suspended as a fire-guard from the mantelpiece!

"I'm very sorry," he said, "but I must get home. So if you don't mind——" and Mrs. Stevens, opening the parlour door, said, "Yes, travelling's bad nowadays; well, good-bye, sir, pleased to have met you."

"The dear old soul!" Billie muttered to himself, as he recollected his way back to the station, "that hug in the kitchen was meant for our "Joe!"

As for Mrs. Stevens, the front door closed, she walked sadly into the kitchen and sat down in the rocking chair. For a few minutes she stared into the fire and then, reluctantly

Mrs. Stevens

lifting her apron to her face, she bent forward and sobbed. "He's all as Joe said! It's a good job as it was our Joe and not him!"

Chapter III

The Tube



“ I THINK it is very extraordinary,” Mr. Impett remarked one morning at breakfast, “ that the soldier himself is so inarticulate. Only the other evening I met a young infantry man in the train between Victoria and Euston, and, though I had a copy of *The Times* with a really excellent map of the Messines district, he seemed either to know nothing about it or to take no interest in it whatever ! ”

Mrs. Impett said, “ He probably hadn’t been out. Your bacon’s going cold, dear.”

“ Of course he’d been out ! ” Mr. Impett answered, taking up his knife and fork, “ he was just back on leave. First for nearly a year he said, yet he didn’t seem to have any ideas that one couldn’t quite well formulate in England.”

As no one seemed anxious to reply, Billie said, “ It isn’t easy to have ideas there, Dad ;

The Tube

you see you are rather too close to things ; like a chap with his face pressed up against a wall so tight that he can't see the bricks."

" Well, he didn't seem at all intelligent," Mr. Impett said, in a tone of complaint, " and yet he admitted that he knew the country ; " so Billie, to change the conversation, asked, " What's everyone going to do to-night ? "

Someone said they did not know, and Billie went on, " I want to see ' Jump,' I believe it's ripping. That's the one Beta Carmel and Fred Calendar are in. They do a great dance at the end of the second act."

" Have you seen it, dear ? " Mrs. Impett asked, " because if so wouldn't you like to see something else ? "

" No ! " Billie laughed, " I haven't seen it, but we used to have great discussions as to which was the best, ' Jump ' or ' The Philacteries.' You see none of us had seen either, but the illustrated papers were full of both with portraits and so on, and somehow I

The Tube

always backed 'Jump.' It's a word Captain Hoyle is rather fond of."

"What is this play about?" Mr. Impett asked, and Billie said, "Good Heavens, Dad! Haven't you seen it either? Oh! well, that settles it! If Mother and Kitty don't want to see it, we'll go together. Oh! it's about nothing exactly, the great things are the dancing and the music. Beta Carmel sings that thing with the chorus 'Oh! you naughty naughty, naughty little girl,' and let's see, what's the other? Oh! I know! 'So she settled that she'd do that too!'"

"And the other play?" Mr. Impett asked. "The, what was it?"

"'The Philacteries,'" Billie prompted.

"Ah, yes! 'The Philacteries.' That sounds like a problem play. I went to see a most excellent thing the other night. I told you about it, my dear. Tom Rice and a friend of his took me along as they had a spare ticket. All about crime and heredity, but I don't remember the name."

Billie laughed. "Well, it's not that sort,"

The Tube

he said. "The 'Philacteries' is a 'show,' a revue, you know. Queenie Melton and Will Hennings, and it's a scream, really!"

Kitty, who had been listening in astonishment, said, "But how do you know, Bill? How do you *know*?"

"Well," Billie answered, "they're in every illustrated paper and on every gramophone in the Line. If you see them and hear them over and over again how can you possibly help knowing them? The Company has one of the songs in duplicate to provide for a casualty to a record, it's, 'I never loved a girl so well,' and a jolly good song. Captain Hoyle used to get fed up with it and send us all out on the Horse Lines and when we came back the gramophone was put away. He's married."

"Well, it's a very funny thing," Mrs. Impett said, in a matter-of-fact way, as she put the cover back on the bacon dish and began to get up, "you seem to know all about London and your Father knows all about France. What did you do with the Storeroom,

The Tube

key, Kitty ? You didn't leave it in the door did you ? ”

“ I bet she did,” Billie said, “ I'll fetch it,” and as he went out Mr. Impett said, “ I don't think perhaps you and Kitty would like just what Bill likes. I think he and I had better go together to-night and we can all go to something else some other day.”

Time was when for an Officer to sit beside a Private in a public conveyance was not only a crime but so criminal as to be impossible, but first the ‘Tube’ and then the War loosened things a little, so that now in underground London you may see a Divisional General seated between a full Sapper or Private, and a mere Cadet, the last being the only man to feel uncomfortable.

That particular evening Billie walked into an already crowded carriage, glanced round, and said, “ Wait a minute, Dad, and I'll get you a seat.”

Mr. Impett stared. It was true he liked

The Tube

sitting down, but never in his experience had anyone "got him a seat."

"I'm all right," he replied, "we haven't far to go," but Billie who had spotted an R.E. shoulder-badge was smiling at a Sapper deep in conversation with a little dark girl; that is to say he started to smile and then suddenly stopped. What he had intended to say was, "I wonder if you would mind letting my Father have your seat?" with the absolute assurance that the Sapper would jump up and say, "Certainly, Sir!" so that Mr. Impett could sit down while Billie and the Sapper exchanged news for a matter of five minutes, to part with a "Good Luck, Sir!" that was really intended. Similar things had happened so often that speculation or doubt simply could not occur; but what Billie actually said was, "What the ——!" and 869 Sapper Bellis getting slowly up on to his feet, remarked to the world in general, "Well, I'll go to 'ell!"

Quite instinctively Billie, who was holding on to a strap with his left hand held out the

The Tube

other and said, "How are you, Bellis? When's your leave up?"

Bellis saw the extended hand without looking at it and stood rather noticeably to attention. It was not the first time he had been obliged to correct 2nd Lieut. W. R. Impett.

"First class, sir!" he said, as Billie lowered his hand again, remembering he was in London. "Going back on Sunday. That Mr. Impett over there, sir?"

"By jove, yes," Billie said, and beckoned to his father who sat down rather amazed. After a few minutes, as a seat elsewhere came vacant, the little dark girl slipped across the carriage and at the next stop Billie and Sapper Bellis let go their straps so that Mr. Impett found himself sandwiched between the pair.

"This is Sapper Bellis, Dad," Billie said, and as Mr. Impett remarked, "Well, ! well!" Bellis added in explanation, "I was with 'im out there."

"But where's your lady friend?" Mr.

The Tube

Impett asked, "I hope I didn't disturb you."

Bellis said, "That's all right, I told her to slide. What was it as got you, sir? Bullet?"

"Yes," Billie answered, "through the shoulder. By the way, what happened? They didn't get those howitzers, did they?"

"They did not, sir," Bellis said, smiling, "but they got it in the neck from number four section. We had seven casualties."

"That wasn't too bad," Billie answered, leaning across the uncomfortable Mr. Impett. "Any particular friends of mine?"

"Smith J, Owens, and Taylor, killed, sir," Bellis said reminiscently, "bayoneted. I've just forgotten who it was as was wounded."

"So Taylor's gone has he," Billie said, and then laughing he added, "Taylor owed me five francs!"

Bellis nodded comprehensively. "Owed money all round, sir," he said, "but he didn't ought to have stuck you."

The Tube

Someone getting out at a station interrupted the talk for a moment by standing right in front of Mr. Impett, and the old man, seizing his opportunity, said, "Tell me now, what's the feeling out there towards Peace? Any talk of coming to terms? You can't like the work, eh?"

Bellis looked across at Billie for a lead but that young gentleman sat back as a refusal to interfere.

"Like it!" Bellis answered at last, "I 'aven't come across anyone as *liked* it, but of course I 'aven't been to every part of the Line."

"Then how is it that you are all so cheerful, or do the papers exaggerate?"

Bellis stared up at an advertisement and said, "I used to work in a shipyard. I don't remember as anyone liked the work and nobody liked the foreman. Once I was ill and got three weeks off with sick pay and I worked the last week because I'd nothing else to do."

Mr. Impett grunted, Bellis' reply was most

unsatisfactory. "And is that the only reason that men carry on? Just because they can't help it?" he asked.

"That's why a lot of them carry on," Bellis said.

"And the others?" Mr. Impett asked persistently, "take yourself, for instance?"

Bellis looked rather uncomfortable so Billie stepped in. "Bellis carries on because he's a damned good soldier."

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," Bellis said, "that's not the reason at all. The reason as I want no patched-up peace is the girl over there. You see we're going to be wed and I want no son, no nor no grandson, of mine to find 'imself working round the top end of Trones Wood!"

"Come to think of it," Mr. Impett said, as they went up the street, "that soldier in the train put the case very well. He did not want any son or grandson of his to meet similar experiences in the future. The nightmare of Prussian militarism must be laid for ever.

The Tube

That's what he meant, and he put it very well, didn't he ? ”

“ Yes, Dad,” Billie replied, “ Bellis is a very decent fellow. He didn't say it in so many words but I've no doubt that's what he meant.”

Chapter IV

Bread and Jam

ONE day Billie got a letter and as he put it by the side of his plate Kitty said, "Who's that from, Bill? I bet I know!"

Billie threw it across the table. "Read it if you want. There's nothing in it."

"Dear Mr. Impett," Kitty read aloud, "Mother would be very pleased if you and your sister would come over to supper this evening. Dick Barrett will be here and I think you said you wanted to meet him. Yours sincerely, Doris Seabrook." Then Kitty turned the page and went on, "P.S.—You never came for your dose of jam and I want to tell you something about the bread, too."

"Oh! I didn't see that!"

"Whatever does she mean?" Kitty asked. "Why, Bill, you're blushing. You are really! Why do you want to meet Dick Barrett?"

Bread and Jam

Dad says he should be ashamed of himself, getting exempted again. He ought to be in France — great healthy thing like him ! ”

Billie said, “ I don’t think you ought to say that, Kit, and anyway he took you past the bull which is more than I did. Have you forgotten ? ”

“ I think he’s a funk all the same ! ”

“ That’s silly, old girl. Funks don’t go near bulls, really, but you want to know what the ‘ jam ’ is, don’t you ? ”

“ It’s gooseberry,” Mrs. Impett said placidly, “ there’s some marmalade in the Storeroom and the key is behind the clock in the hall.”

“ Thanks, awfully,” Billie replied, with a signalling frown across the table, “ this is all right. Hullo ! here’s the paper ! ”

“ All the interesting news is on this side,” Kitty remarked. “ Air raid on Folkestone, sixteen killed, seventy-five wounded ; Labour delegates flout the Government ; Sinn Fein election result ; United States’ Troops in

Bread and Jam

London; the supply of beer; Church Conference—far-reaching results; criminal at fourteen; matrimonial mix-up——”

“Damn!” Billie said. “Sorry, Mother, but I couldn’t help it. Serjeant Armstrong’s hit. Best N.C.O. in the Company!” Then, after a pause, he added, “of course, it was bound to happen sooner or later, but I wish it had been some one else.”

“Was he a friend of yours, dear?” Mrs. Impett asked sympathetically, “I saw in the paper the other day that Lord Blank’s eldest son had been wounded. It’s very dreadful!”

Billie rustled his paper a little. Just lately a horrible fear had haunted him, that Mr. and Mrs. Impett were not all that he had thought. The woman at the head of the table, and the man who was late for breakfast, were his Mother and Father. Before that vile afternoon when he said good-bye and pretended that he had a cold in his head as he changed to cross London, these two people had been everything in the world. Of course they were

Bread and Jam

so still, but—— there seemed a frightening difference somehow !

“ Yes it’s a rotten war,” he said, “ if you don’t mind I’ll get my boots. I’m going into the village.”

“ Now then,” he said later to Doris, “ the others are playing billiards. Let’s sit here and you can tell me what you wanted to say about the bread.”

“ Well,” Doris said, “ it’s rather awkward. You see, I was a bit vexed and—— you know that bit about you being very conceited, and so on——”

“ That wasn’t in the book, eh ? Do you really think I didn’t know that ? ”

“ Oh ! Well, that’s all right then,” Doris went on hurriedly, “ but you see, you deserved it. Now about the jam. Just wait till I get Donald’s letters.”

Billie watched the little figure go out and thought she ought to have been carrying a French water-bottle on her left hip.

“ Here we are,” Doris said, settling down

Bread and Jam

in a chair, "we'll just take a sample. 'Last night our fellows had a bad time, seven days in the Line and then told to find working-parties for the R.E. The Colonel was wild. Luckily the Sappers were under Impett and——' "

"Yes, it's hard lines——" Billie began.

"Don't interrupt, please—— 'were under Impett and that saved the situation. I don't know what there is about that fellow but after he's walked up and down the line for a bit we always feel that our responsibility is at an end. Of course, it isn't really, but somehow he makes you feel that you are not required. The funny thing is that I don't know him by sight! You see it's always dark when we come across each other, but he is absolutely first-class and I could tell his voice anywhere!' That's one bit of jam, here's another."

Billie got up and said, "Thanks very much but I don't like hearing that kind of thing. Your brother could say all that about anyone."

Bread and Jam

“Oh! but there are some better ones than that. I remember one about your section going through a wood or something——”

“Look here, Doris,” Billie began, “I say! I’m awfully sorry, Miss Seabrook——”

“I don’t mind a bit,” the girl laughed, “You can call me Doris if you want to and I’ll call you Bill. May I?”

“Yes,” Billie answered, “but will you *please* not read any more things like that. I really don’t like it.”

“All right,” Doris said, putting the letters away. “If I don’t read any more will you *please* tell me what made you jump up and stare at me the other afternoon? You said perhaps you would some day. I thought at first you were ill but somehow I don’t think you were. What was it?”

Billie sat down again, “May I smoke? Well, it was rather a queer thing. I don’t see why I shouldn’t tell you.” All the same, it was difficult and Doris got almost

Bread and Jam

tired of waiting before he went on. "You see you reminded me of some one."

"But how very ordinary!" Doris remarked, "fancy a man nearly jumping out of his skin, and frightening everyone to death, just because I reminded him of someone! That's what people do in picture shows! Do I know her?"

"Of course you don't," Billie laughed, "I don't know her myself. That's why I jumped. I'd thought about her a great deal and all of a sudden she turned up. That's why I jumped you see, the whole thing was so extraordinary!"

Doris leaned back and said quietly, "I wonder if you would mind telling me all about it. Right away from the beginning I mean."

"Well," Billie answered, "it's very difficult to explain and there wasn't exactly any beginning, but you see there was a picture of a girl in our Mess and it went about with us wherever we went, and it was awfully like you, and somehow I got to like it, and—you

Bread and Jam

know how you sort of imagine things in the Line when you're tired——" then, after looking up, he said miserably, "I'm awfully sorry you're vexed, you needn't be really——"

Doris, who was blushing most uncomfortably, said, "No, I'm not vexed at all. I think I understand just what you mean, but—— would you mind not saying any more about it? As you say, when you're tired in the Line, things are different, aren't they?" so that Billie answered, "Quite different. Let's go and play billiards with the others."

Doris got up and, going out into the hall, said, "Don't think me silly, Mr. Impett, Donald has written so much and so often about you that I always feel that I've known you for ages."

"Like I feel about you, Miss Seabrook," Billie remarked, with an emphasis on her name, "but you ought really to carry a French water-bottle on your hip, you know!"

Doris stared for a moment and then said,

Bread and Jam

“ I think if you and Kitty play Dick Barrett and me it should make a good fight,” and Billie, with rather a determined look, said, “ Yes, I fancy it will.”

Chapter V

The Board



“ I SHALL not be home to dinner to-night, my dear, I’m going to dine at the Club.”

“ Committee meeting ? ” Mrs. Impett asked, “ or is it the final of the billiard handicap ? ”

“ Neither, my dear,” the old man replied, “ it’s about Bill.”

“ Well, they’ll elect him if you put his name up. They make them honourable members or something, don’t they ? ”

Mr. Impett fidgeted a little. “ It’s nothing of that sort at all,” he said impressively, “ I’m going to talk to Macbeth, he’s on the Board.” Then as Mrs. Impett continued to busy herself with the advertisements of an illustrated paper, he added, “ The Medical Board that Bill goes before to-morrow.”

“ Oh ! I see,” Mrs. Impett said. “ Well,

The Board

don't be late or you'll have another attack of asthma."

In the evening Mr. Impett wandered through the reading-room of the club, settling down as though by the merest accident in a deep leather chair next to a shrewd little man with glasses. After a few minutes he dropped his paper and looked round, "Hullo, Macbeth!" he said, "how are you to-night, and how's the wife?"

"Fine," Macbeth said.

"That's good news!" Mr. Impett went on cheerily, "I suppose you don't see much of her these days, what with your duties on the Medical Boards and one thing and another?"

"We meet at breakfast," the Doctor said, "how's your son?"

Mr. Impett hugged himself. He was just wondering how he could introduce the subject. "He's better than you might expect," he said casually, "goes before a Board somewhere to-morrow. The trouble is he won't

The Board

admit there's anything wrong with him at all. You know what young men are ; but what I say is that they should consider the military point of view. As I said to him the other night, every man who ' goes sick ' in France needs another fit man to attend to him. That's about right, isn't it ? ” .

“ I wouldn't be surprised,” Macbeth said. “ What's the matter with him ? ”

“ Well,” Impett replied, “ of course I'm not a doctor, but the other day at the Seabrooks he had some sort of attack in the middle of the afternoon and Doris Seabrook had to get him a brandy and soda. She was quite frightened.”

Macbeth said, “ Probably the worst thing he could have taken. He's coming before my Board to-morrow. I'll let you know what I think of him.”

Mr. Impett said, “ Thanks, I wish you would,” and, having made his point, slipped off to a game of bridge upstairs.

Billie walked into a bare-looking room next morning at eleven o'clock, saluted and said,

The Board

“ Good morning, sir,” to a Colonel R.A.M.C. who presided over the Board.

“ 2nd Lt. W. R. Impett, sir,” he added, “ Nth Field Coy. R.E. ex-B.E.F., gunshot wound right shoulder, August, 1916.”

The Colonel smiled a little and whispered something to a small grey-haired civilian doctor with glasses, who nodded in reply.

“ Well, and how are you now, Mr. Impett ? ” the Colonel asked, “ feeling better ? ”

“ Perfectly fit, sir ! ” Billie answered.

“ Nothing wrong at all, eh ? Nerves quite all right ? ”

“ Weren’t ever wrong, sir,” Billie said.

“ Just go over there, will you, Mr. Impett, and let Captain Wynne examine you.”

Billie went “ over there ” and after a somewhat rapid examination which presumably sounded all those parts of the body that really mattered was reported “ sound.”

“ So you don’t suffer from nerves ? ” the little man asked.

“ Never did in my life, sir,” Billie answered.

The Board

"Never in France?" the Doctor asked, putting his glasses on the table.

"No, sir!" Billie answered, "never!" Then, feeling a little uncomfortable, he added, "Of course I've been seared, sir, lots of times."

The Colonel laughed. "Want to go out again?" he asked. "Yes, sir," Billie said earnestly, "I do!"

The little man picked up his glasses and said, "Why?"

"Well, sir," Billie said, "there isn't any reason why I shouldn't, and my section-serjeant's been wounded since I came home."

"They'll get another," the Colonel said.

"That's just what I'm afraid of, sir, they may put up Corporal Prince and he wouldn't do for number four section at all."

The Colonel rubbed his chin and looked Billie over carefully as though he was buying a horse, "Can't you trust your O.C.?" he asked.

Billie moved his feet a little. "My Major,

The Board

sir, is the best man you could find, and so is Captain Hoyle, but——”

“ You don’t quite trust them ? Well, now, Mr. Impett, Doctor Macbeth has a few questions to ask you.”

Billie said, “ Yes, sir,” and stared at the little man.

“ Do you remember going out to tea one afternoon,” the Doctor asked, pointing his glasses at Billie in the manner of a cross-examining Counsel, “ and having to be supplied with a brandy and soda by a young lady ? ”

Billie did not blush, he went white and perspired. The thing was impossible ! Of course he remembered, but how did the Board know, and what could he say ?

“ Are you in the habit of drinking brandy and soda in the afternoon ? ”

“ No, sir, never ! ”

“ Do you drink spirits at all ? ”

“ No, sir, never ! ”

“ Then why did you drink that brandy and soda ? ”

The Board

"We don't know that he did," the Colonel put in.

"All right," the little man said quickly, "did you drink a brandy and soda one afternoon when you were out to tea?"

Billie said, "Yes, sir," in almost a whisper, and felt inclined to run out of the room.

"Something came over you, you jumped up in the middle of a conversation, nearly fainted, sat back again in a chair, had a brandy and soda, and then went home?"

"That is so, sir."

"Can you explain what it was that upset you?"

Billie moistened his lips and looked appealingly at the Colonel. After a little silence, during which the old Doctor tapped on the table with his glasses, Billie said, "I could, sir, but I don't want to."

After that it seemed as though no one would ever speak again till the Colonel said, "Just go and sit in the other room for a moment, Mr. Impett," and Billie went out.

When he was recalled the Colonel said,

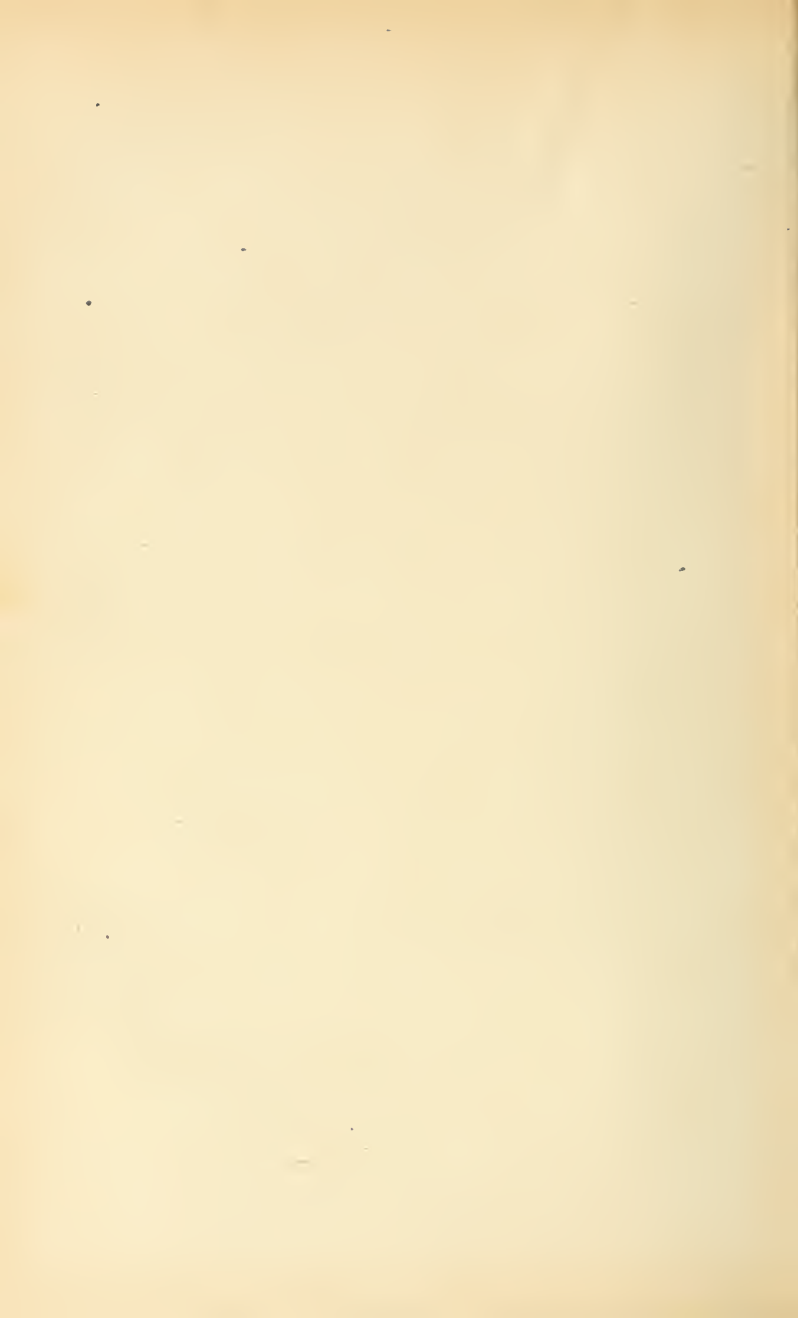
The Board

“ Well, now, Mr. Impett, we have gone carefully into this case and you will come before another Board in two months’ time. Meanwhile you will be temporary Home Service and in all probability will receive instructions from the War Office to report to your Third Line. Good morning ! ”

Billie said, “ Good morning, sir ! ” saluted, and went out. When he got into the street he stopped by a shop-window, and after gazing blindly at a picture of the last popular battle, carried out by very good-looking and immaculately shaved soldiers, each of whom had been hit in the middle of the forehead and bandaged by some mysterious agency, said to himself, “ Someone’s given me away. It’s Doris ! ”

Chapter VI

The Stay-at-home



NEXT day, after breakfast, Billie took his sister into the potting-shed behind the wash-house, because for long years that had been the place of secret commune. Conspiracies, complaints, plans of campaign against some hostile nurse, all had been hatched and developed in the little lean-to that smelt of earth and harboured beetles and other garden insects according to the time of year.

“Look here, Kitty,” he said, “someone’s been telling tales!” and after thinking a little the girl said, “Well, it isn’t me.”

“I didn’t suppose it was,” Billie said quite untruthfully. “The question is what’s to be done?”

Kitty rubbed some mud off one boot with the toe of another and said, “You’d better tell me what it’s about.” So Billie told her,

The Stay-at-Home

and after kicking her feet as she sat on the edge of the potting bench she said, "Is it pax if I tell?"

"Absolute pax and all assistance," Billie answered. It was an old-time formula.

"Well, you see," she went on, "Doris told me about you being taken ill and I told dad. I thought it was all right. Why, wasn't it?"

Billie whistled an air from "The Philacteries" and said, "H'm. The little Doctor-man with the glasses must be a member of dad's club. It's absolute pax but I'm going to speak to Doris. It's her fault. Let's go and see her."

"I can't go now," Kitty said, "I've got to help mother with some things."

"All right," Billie answered, "perhaps it's as well I should go alone."

"It's absolute pax, Bill?" Kitty asked before she got down from the bench, and Billie said, "Absolute, old girl," and set off up the back drive that led past the farm where they got their milk.

The Stay-at-Home

Doris Seabrook said, "Good morning, Mr. Impett, do you want to see mother? She's in the house somewhere."

"No," Billie said, "I want to see you. Where can we talk?"

Doris froze at once and said, "Here."

"All right," Billie said, "one place is as good as another," and stood with his hands in his pockets, staring across at the girl.

"What's the matter, Mr. Impett?" Doris asked wonderingly. "Nothing wrong, is there?"

"Very," Billie said; "someone told the dad that I was taken ill here, he told a doctor man, and the doctor told the Medical Board."

"Well?"

"Well, they wouldn't pass me for G.S. General Service, you know, and it was all because I had a brandy and soda here that afternoon."

"Well?"

"Well, they asked me why I had it. Don't you understand?"

"And what did you say?" Doris almost

The Stay-at-Home

whispered. "What could I say!" Billie returned, "tell them that I thought you were the Trench Girl?"

Doris looked miserably round and said, "No of course you couldn't say that."

"So because I wouldn't say just how it all happened they cast me for Home Service."

"I'm awfully sorry," Doris said after a moment, "I didn't know I was doing any harm and I didn't know the Trench Girl then. Don't you remember? You told me afterwards."

Billie thought for a minute and said, "Yes, I think that's so. But all the same it's your fault and you've got to put it right."

Doris hesitated and said, "Come and sit in the library. I want to talk. Now then," she said, when they were settled on a deep settee, "what do you mean by saying I must put it right? Put what right?"

"You know perfectly well," Billie replied; "you told my people and you've got to put it right."

Doris sat up rather straight and stared at

The Stay-at-Home

him. "Do you want me," she asked, "to go to your father and say, 'He came to tea with me and suddenly thought I was some imaginary person and nearly fainted, so I gave him a brandy and soda' ? If I say that they'll probably lock you up."

"Well, I might as well be locked up as Home Service," Billie grunted. "Anyway you told them and you've got to get me out of it. If I can't pass G.S. it's your fault !"

"All right," Doris said angrily, "I don't care. You come here and have some silly dream and then blame me !"

"It's no good getting cross. If you injure anyone by accident you try and put it right, don't you ?"

"I really don't see how I can," Doris said, calming down, "but I'll try."

"All right," Billie answered, "try. If you don't succeed you'll feel horrid all your life so you'd better try hard. It isn't nice to know that you have done someone a dirty trick, even by accident, and not been able to put it right."

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"I'm going to try," Doris said very quietly, "I suppose that's all you came about?" and Billie who, from long experience of authority, recognised that most potent order, a hint, said, "Yes, that's all I want, just to be G.S. again as soon as possible. Well, thanks very much," and went home.

How Doris was to do it did not seem to concern him. If anyone had told him, beyond contradiction, that he had accidentally injured them, the obligation to put matters right would have been carried out from its sheer necessity. So he just felt a little sorry that Doris was being put to the trouble, and dismissed the thing from his mind.

As for Doris, the door closed, she sat down by the gong and thought hard for five minutes. Then the absurdity of her position if anyone should come and find her in a draught on a purely ornamental and uncomfortable chair in the hall, sent her off to join the others, where she sat on the club-fender in a dream.

Some one was playing billiards, she knew,

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and remarks of "hard lines" and the click of the balls made an accompaniment to her thoughts. How to get Billie passed "G.S." that was the problem. If she failed she must never meet him again, that was understood, for among really young people injuries incurred by tale-telling are of course unforgivable. Then she realised that even if she succeeded it would be a Pyrrhic victory. Billie would say, "Thanks awfully," go out to France and get killed. There was really nothing to look forward to in either event.

Someone said, "I think that's game," and after some further talk and the closing of a door behind the other players, Dick Barrett came and sat beside her. "What's to do, Doris?" he asked, to which Doris naturally said, "Nothing."

After a while she turned and looked Barrett in the eyes for half a minute so that he moved a little nearer along the fender and said, "Now you just tell me what it is. What's the good of being a pal if I can't help you? I might want you to do something for me

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some day you know, and then I wouldn't like to ask. What is it ? ”

“ That's just the trouble, Dick. If you help me here you see I might have to refuse to help you when it came your turn.”

Dick turned his head away and looked at the clock. Then he took the girl's hand and said, “ Look here, Doris, some people think I'm a rotter because I'm not in uniform. I believe you know the circumstances. Please don't think me a rotter in any other direction.”

“ I don't, really,” Doris replied miserably.

“ Do you mind if I speak quite openly ? ”
Dick went on. “ Very well then, listen. You want me to help you and you are afraid that in turn I may ask you to marry me and you might not like to refuse. Put that right out of your head because I want you to do exactly what you like and I want to do exactly what you want me to do. I can't quite explain, Doris, but when I do anything for you I am absolutely happy.”

Doris set her little teeth and said, “ Very

The Stay-at-Home

well then, I'm in a hole and you've got a chance of pulling me out. Billie Impett had tea here the other day and in the middle of it he jumped up and nearly fainted, so I gave him a brandy and soda. Then I told his people and they told Doctor Norman Macbeth, thought it was a good tale, I suppose. When Billie came before the Medical Board Doctor Macbeth was on it and asked him if he had been given brandy and soda in the middle of the afternoon, and Billie said, 'Yes.' So they marked him Temporary Home Service."

"And then?" Dick asked quietly.

"Well, then," Doris went on, "Billie came here and accused me of not playing 'cricket,' and said I had to get him passed 'G.S.' at once or he wouldn't be friends any more."

Barrett took out his cigarette-case and said, "I confess I don't quite understand. Was Impett really ill? If so, the Board were right."

"No," Doris said, "that's the difficulty."

The Stay-at-Home

He isn't ill at all, you see—it's rather difficult to explain but—he suddenly thought I was just like someone who lived in his imagination and—well, he jumped up and went very white. So, of course, I got him a brandy and soda."

Dick Barrett, with the instinctive knowledge of disaster, said, "In other words, I suppose he had suddenly met his ideal and fallen in love?"

For a while Doris said nothing, and then turning her head she laid a hand on his arm. "They say girls aren't straight," she said, with her chin in the air, "but I'm going to run straight if I can. What you say is true, and if Billie asked me to marry him I would say 'yes,' and if you asked me I would say 'no.'"

They looked into each other's eyes, the girl's hand still resting lightly on his arm, till Dick got up and walked to the window.

"I believe I like you better every time you speak," he said, "but what can I do? Tell

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me ; give me a hint, and I won't rest or be happy till it's done."

Doris swallowed a threatening choke and answered, " You know Macbeth. He's your doctor. Macbeth owes a lot to your father. Everyone says so."

Dick said, " That's right," and stared across the lawn.

" Tell your father the truth," Doris went on desperately. " Tell him that I love Billie and that if I don't get him passed ' G.S.' again he won't have anything more to do with me ! "

Barrett took a stroll round the billiard table and ended up before a sporting picture at the other end of the room.

" I wonder if you know what you are doing," he said, staring at the figure of an old-fashioned gentleman in hunting kit, " I wonder if you realise that you are asking me to do all I can to get Impett out to France again as soon as possible so that he can run the risk of being killed ? I wonder if you know what I have suffered," he added, coming

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back to the fire-place, " and if you realise that you are asking me now to send a fellow out who has been there already, and a man, who, as everyone probably knows, is in love with the same girl as I am ? Because if you do you must see that it's rather hard, isn't it ? "

" Oh, Dick ! " Doris cried, jumping down, " I didn't think of that ! I didn't, really ! You mustn't do it ! "

" My very dear girl," Dick said, " I'm going to. As long as you understand that I never hated anything more in my life, that's all I want. Any fellow who has to stay in England ought to be glad to have a chance of doing something that really hurts. Good morning, Doris, and thanks very much for telling me the truth. I like you better than ever."

Doris watched him go out, then went upstairs to her room and sat down at a writing-table.

" Dear Billie," she began, and after sucking the top of her pen, tore the sheet up and started again.

The Stay-at-Home

DEAR MR. IMPETT,

I must write and say how sorry I am that my carelessness should have resulted in your being retained in England. I have, however, taken steps which I think and hope will rectify the mistake.

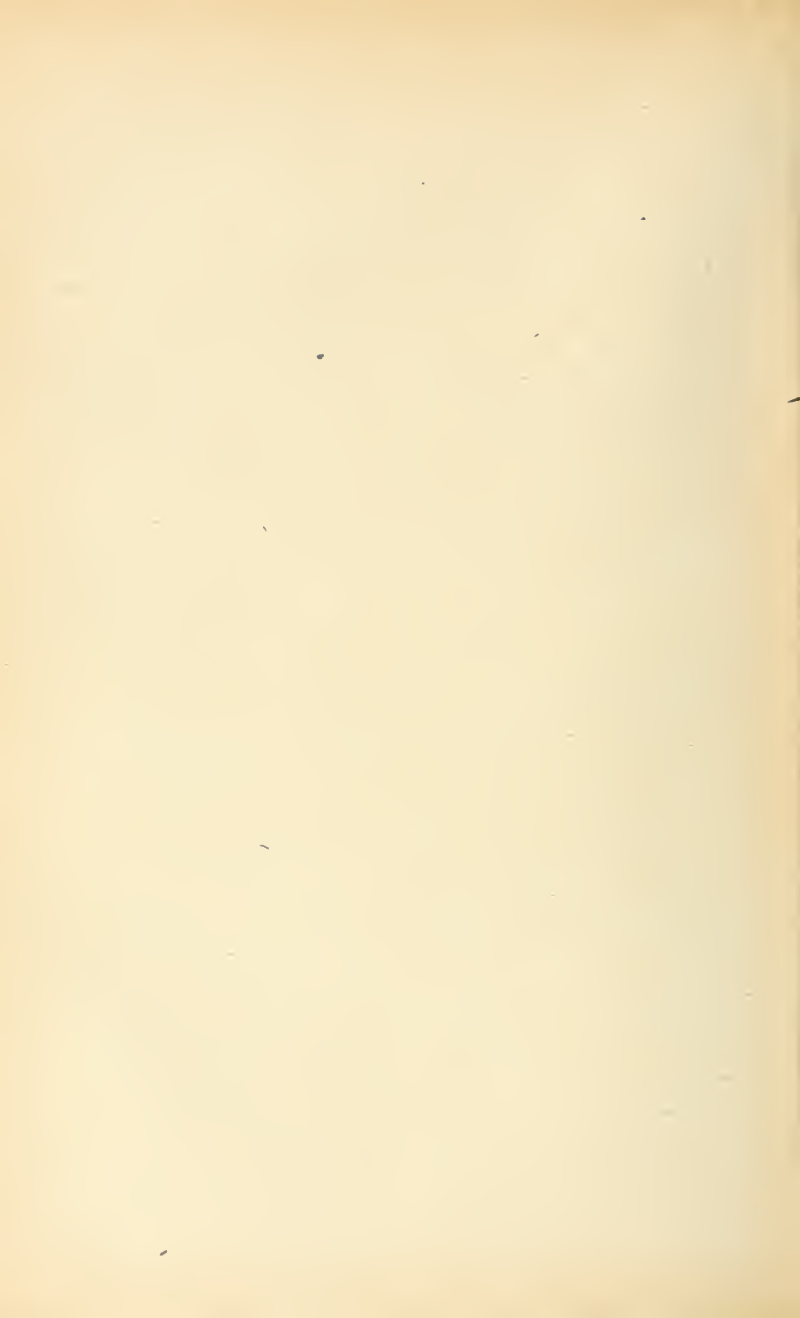
I am, yours sincerely,

DORIS SEABROOK.

After which she slipped on to the bed and cried into the pillow after the manner of women.

Chapter VII

Midurbia



BILLIE came down to breakfast one morning and found an official-looking envelope by the side of his plate marked "On His Majesty's Service."

"Hullo!" he said, "here are my marching orders, or is it another Medical Board?"

Mrs. Impett said, "Perhaps they want you at the War Office, dear," but as Billie was opening his letter there did not seem any need to reply.

What he read was, "You will report for duty to O.C. Reserve Field Coy. R.E., Midurbia, forthwith," and Billie said, "Good Lord! Midurbia! Don't know a soul there!"

Mr. Impett folded up his paper and asked, "When have you to go?"

"Forthwith, Dad," Billie said.

"Don't they give you a date or time or anything?" Mr. Impett asked, and Billie

Midurbia

said, "No. It's just 'forthwith.' Mess with them this evening, I suppose."

"In my correspondence," the old man went on, "I always insist on my clerks——"

"That's very annoying," Mrs. Impett interrupted, "The wash doesn't come back till to-morrow. Still, I can send it on. Midurbia is it? Well, that's not so far away; change at Stafford."

"That's right," Billie said. "Kitty and I will go down to the station and look up the trains. I don't trust guides when I'm reporting."

Late in the afternoon, on an overcrowded platform, someone said, "Mr. Impett, sir?" and Billie said, "Yes, I've got a valise in the van. Where do I go?"

"There's an officer here, sir, he'll tell you," the batman said, and Billie found himself shaking hands with a tired-looking little Captain named Kirk who led him out to a car.

"Camp's about a mile out," Kirk said, as

they swung past the cathedral. "You were with the stickers, weren't you? Damn fine Field Company. Where'd you get hit? Shoulder, was it? That's good. Had any tea? Fine!"

Billie, who was inclined to be phlegmatic, smiled as Kirk made audible comments on the weather, sleepy pedestrians, his gears, and the news from France, in a way that reminded him of his 'real' Major once ticking off a subaltern for what he called 'thinking aloud.'

"Who's in command, sir?" Billie asked, and Kirk answered, "Dennis Jones. Fine fellow. Smashed up at Le Cateau in '14. Bless these children, are they tired of life? Just at the foot of the hill too! Ever driven one of these rat-traps? Here's the camp. Watch the sentry present arms because it's the Major's car!"

Billie began to think he would like Kirk, and after a wash and an inspection of his tent, went into the Mess rather as a new boy at school. There seemed a terrible lot of strange faces, and he was just wondering where the

Midurbia

Major was when some one turned him round by the shoulders and shook his hand.

Billie said, "Good evening, sir. Captain Kirk very kindly drove me up in your car; it was good of you to send it down to the station."

"Oh! that's all right," the Major answered. "You must thank Captain Kirk. You'll have lots more to thank him for some day, I'll bet. Damn fine fellow, Kirk, got badly knocked about at Hooge, you know. By the way, I had a letter about you from Captain Hoyle. Don't think I remember Hoyle, but he commended you to my personal care so you can look on me as your godfather till you go out again."

Billie said, "Thank you, sir," and as the Major turned to speak to some one else, had a good look at his face. The first thing that struck him was that the Major was not as old as his wrinkles suggested, and the second that there must have been a perpetual fight between two of the kindest eyes he had ever seen and a mouth with a firmness that

bordered on the relentless. Born with the eyes, Billie guessed, and developed the mouth on Service.

“Dinner is served, sir,” a mess waiter announced and in the immediate hush that fell on the anteroom, Billie distinctly heard Captain Kirk say, “Reported back from the stickers ; gunshot wound right shoulder ; temporary Home Service ; mentioned in despatches this morning for blowing up some German howitzers ; quite a good fellow !” and went through to the mess room in a dream.

Chapter VIII

The Babes in the Wood

It took Billie a little time to shake down to his new conditions. There was, for instance, a tendency to pal up with all the men who had been out in France or elsewhere and politely ignore the others, a tendency promptly put right by Captain Kirk who, as an overseas man himself, could snub ex-B.E.F. men with a good grace when occasion demanded.

Then, again, instead of six officers as he was accustomed to, there were here a score under training, and in all other ways things were strange. Being temporary Home Service was a nuisance, too, as he found himself treated with special consideration, till at last he took to playing chess in the evenings ; and it was over a game of chess that he met the Babes in the Wood.

The Babes in the Wood

He had noticed them before for their extreme youth but that was all, and it was not until Bird, aged nineteen, said to Leigh, aged nineteen and a quarter, "I say! you can't do that! Can he, Mr. Impett?" that he got to know them at all. It was rather nice, for instance, to be called "Mr. Impett" by officers of equal rank, and Bird's assertion that a Knight took two paces to the rear with the left foot and one pace to a flank with the right foot, made him burst out laughing.

Later Billie met them in many ways and so missed them a little when for three nights they disappeared from the Mess.

"Where are the Babes these days?" Kirk asked him, "I don't like these youngsters vamousing like this."

"I don't know, sir," Billie said, "but I'll find out if you wish."

"Do," Kirk said, "that's a good man and tell me. First-class boys but I like to know where they are."

The Babes in the Wood

So next evening, as the Babes slipped out of the anteroom, Billie picked up his rain-coat and walked into the town. First he tried the picture house, drew blank, and stood in the Market Square to think. A military policeman passed by at the salute and Billie, in true B.E.F. style, walked up the street with him for information.

“What’s on here besides the pictures?” he asked.

“To-night, sir?” the Corporal said.
“There’s a boxing match at the Pavilion. That’s all I know of. Second street on your right, sir.”

Billie said, “Thanks very much,” and later walked into a corrugated-iron building full of soldiers and tobacco smoke. There were some unoccupied seats reserved for officers and as Billie’s ticket was green he was piloted by a very important Lance-Corporal to a seat of honour where he found himself alone and looked round. The Babes were not there anyway, but it was getting

The Babes in the Wood

late and he might as well see what was coming.

Then a Sapper, whom Billie recognized as one of the Mess Stewards, stepped into the Ring and announced that the next item would be the final of the Bantams between the two novices who had run through on the two previous evenings. Everyone clapped and Billie thought there was rather more attention paid than the announcement seemed to call for. The fighters, for instance, did not come on for a couple of minutes, and yet the whole audience kept quiet, and even when eventually two slim figures came under the ropes, there was nothing more than a murmur.

Billie got out his cigarette-case and, as the Time-keeper called, "Seconds out!" and then, "Time!" looked up and gasped, for there in the most fighting of fighting kits stood the Babes in the Wood, black murder written across the face of each.

The Babes in the Wood

There was no doubt that they shook hands, though as a matter of fact it was questioned because Leigh spun round and hit Bird full in the mouth as soon as their right hands parted, but for the rest it was, as one of the sergeants said afterwards, the reallest thing in the Competition. The first round was too vicious in the opinion of the experts, they could not last at that pace they said, which of course is the spectators point of view, but Bird, who had made up his young mind that Leigh should not last a minute longer than was necessary, sailed in on the second round with a ferocity that kept up the pace.

In the fourth round Leigh got Bird well into his corner where some water had been spilled on the floor, and after three body blows and an almost effectual left on the jaw, gasped, "Look out! You're going to slip!" and backed off into the ring. At that moment, as it happened, "Time" was called and both boys adjourned to their chairs.

The Babes in the Wood

In the eighth round, after hard close fighting, Leigh put his hands over his face and swayed. He was done. Bird, who had only to hit him and walk out as victor, stood hesitating, and then as a murmur of voices rose, to be quelled at once by the Referee, took the swaying youngster by the arm and led him back to his chair.

Of course the whole thing was unorthodox, and the audience, starting with groans, grew to cat-calling as the Romans sneered at mercy years ago, till Billie, seeing Bird standing miserably in the middle of the ring, got on to his feet.

He just took one look round the Pavilion, halting his gaze wherever noise continued, till there was not a sound to be heard. "That's a good fight," he said at last, "and now we're all going home; and if someone will get a taxi I shall be very much obliged."

The Babes in the Wood

Later in the night he crawled into Captain Kirk's tent and told him the whole tale, till Kirk laughed.

“ Well, I'm blessed ! ” he said. “ There's a chance for the Old Country yet ! ”

Chapter IX

Uriah the Hittite



ONE of the disheartening features of Army life is of course the constant break up of friendships. No other existence will make for a man so many and such sound friends, but, on the other hand, in no other life are friendships so short. Captain Kirk who, as a foil to his true kindness affected pessimism, was fond of attributing the enthusiasm of such acquaintances entirely to the fact that they were not given time to disintegrate; but when Kirk spoke in that vein no one took him seriously. ;

To Billie, whose Military life had largely been spent in the company of a well-tried half-dozen officers in France, with a new face now and then to replace a casualty, the instability of a draft-finding depot was confusing. By and by, of course, he would be passed "G.S." himself and get back to the "Stickers."

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"There's a wire come into the Orderly Room, sir," Billie said to Kirk, as they stood in the rain watching a new subaltern mount guard. "Shall I bring it?"

"Take it into the Mess," Kirk answered a little crossly, "I'll be there in a minute." Things were not going at all happily with Captain Kirk. Two "returns" had been criticised by Higher Command, his fox terrier had cut a paw badly, and now the weather had broken.

"Evening, Major," he said, strolling into the Mess Tent later on, "rotten weather. Any news?"

The Major handed him the telegram which he had taken from Billie and, pulling deeply at a cigar, watched Kirk over the top of his paper.

The telegram was of the usual official variety, full of "AAA," which means a full stop, but what brought the frown to Kirk's face was the fact that it meant, "send another Lieutenant to France at once."

Kirk handed the wire back and rang the bell for a whiskey and soda. Then he walked

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over to the notice board, took a picture paper from the table, and finally said, "Damn!" so that Billie instinctively went out to his tent.

After the waiter had come and gone the Major asked quietly, "Who's next on the list? Smith, isn't it?"

Kirk unbuttoned a pocket, searched a while for his notebook, remembered that he had left it in the Orderly Room, and said, "No, sir, it's Tennant"; adding, after a little silence, "I wish you would detail officers yourself, sir. I hate doing it. Of course they are all keen to go, but the last two I sent have gone West and I hate the job!"

"You're getting nervous, old man," the Major said across the table. "Too much Delville Wood and too little sleep. Better take a rest. Hand over for a while and go away. Orderly Rooms are not the place for invalids."

"I'm not an invalid, sir!" Kirk replied, "I passed for General Service last week. Board said I was as fit as a fiddle!"

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“ Rats ! ” the Major laughed. “ You’ve seen the last of France for a long time. As for worrying over casualties, I thought you had a roster showing each Officer in his order for overseas ? Very well then, if Tennant is the next on the list he goes automatically. If you start picking and choosing then I grant you it becomes difficult, but once a roster is formed the rest follows.”

Kirk said, “ Yes, sir,” and took a drink.

“ In any case,” the Major went on, “ Tennant is naturally the man you would send. Been here a long time, and fully trained.”

“ Yes, sir,” Kirk answered, “ will you excuse me if I go and change ? I’m dining out to-night.”

“ Really ? ” the Major said. “ Where ? ”

Kirk took his hat from the hook, lit a cigarette, and said, “ The Tennants, sir. Good night in case I’m late back.”

The Major watched him cross the compound in the driving rain, and said, “ Now what’s the matter there, I wonder ? Kirk turning soft, or what ? Have to send him away,”

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and taking out his notebook he wrote, " Kirk—leave," which, after all, did not mean that he could not guess.

Later in the evening, as a miserable bugler sounded the Last Post in the rain, Kirk drew back from a too-hot fire and remarked, " By the way, Tennant, have you heard that another officer is wanted for France ? "

He had been trying to say it for three-quarters of an hour, in fact ever since the ladies had left the dining-room.

Tennant, who had dined well, said, " Good ! who's the lucky man ? " and Kirk quite truthfully answered, " I don't know."

" Plenty of unmarried officers available," Tennant went on, " Smith, Paul, and Dynes. Young fellows all keen to go out and means less cost to the State if they come to grief, no pension for the widow, and so on," and then the door opened and someone asked, " How much longer are you men going to be in here ? "

The only man in the room who did not

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turn his head was Captain Kirk. It looked rude, of course, but the footsteps had been too well known to give the interruption any air of surprise.

"Coming, old girl," Tennant replied, and, as his wife closed the door with an incredulous smile, Kirk got up and said, "Do you mind if I go? I have a lot of work to do to-morrow and want to get to bed."

Everyone stared, and a Major from another Unit said, "Nothing of the sort! You can't leave yet. Come on, Tennant, let's go into the other room, it mustn't be a late night for any of us."

Kirk fidgeted through two songs, and a piano solo by Lieutenant Tennant, R.E., and just as a reputed soprano started "When you come back to me," he felt a touch on his arm and Eva Tennant asked, "What's the matter with you to-night? Come and sit down."

Kirk said, "Nothing, really," and looking at his watch sat beside her in the window.

"There is something the matter," Eva said.

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“What is it? Do you think I don’t know when you, of all people, are worried? Why, I knew as soon as you came into the house. What is it? Were you vexed because I didn’t sit next to you at the pictures last night? It wasn’t my fault. Surely you knew that.”

Kirk said, “No, it isn’t that. It isn’t anything, really. I’m just tired and run down.”

Eva looked at him steadily. “You are not speaking the truth, Jim,” she remarked, “and that’s not like you. Do you know that I have believed every word you have ever said to me? And do you know I wouldn’t say that of any other man on earth? Tell me what it is! Is it military or is it, well, unmilitary?”

Kirk got up as the song ended on a rather flat top note and answered, “It’s the most damnable mixture of the two! Good night and many thanks.”

I suppose one Orderly Room in Camp is much like another, trestle tables covered with Army blankets, a damaged telephone, improvised bookcases carrying the Manual of

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Military Law, King's Regulations, and perhaps a dozen other technical books, and all the time the flap of the canvas in the wind. Anyway, it seemed dreary enough to Captain Kirk next morning as he sat down to a pile of correspondence, part of which threatened to end in a Court Martial.

As a rule such things seemed natural, part of the world he lived in, but now, after a sleepless night, he caught himself noticing futilities and funking things that, other days, were dealt with off hand.

About ten o'clock the telephone rang and a voice from Higher Command asked when it might be expected that the nomination would be received for the Officer required by the B.E.F. In other words, someone in authority wanted to know the name of an Officer for France at once, and would be interested to learn what caused the delay.

Kirk said, "Send it along in a minute, sir," and pushed the telephone across the table. So it had come! He knew it was inevitable, and yet—— "My compliments to the Major,"

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he said to an Orderly who answered the bell, "and ask if I can see him for a minute. It is rather urgent."

The thing was frankly insoluble. Not to nominate Tennant meant nominating Smith, a good man and eligible in every way, but not as good as Tennant, and it was not his turn on the roster. He would leave it to the Major; say he was ill or something. No one had a right to put him into such a position. That would settle it, and whatever the Major decided, would be right. Later he would "report sick" and go on leave.

"The Major is out of Camp, sir," the orderly said, saluting at the entrance to the marquee, "and won't be back till late this afternoon. Gone to Headquarters, sir."

Kirk said, "Thank you, Orderly," and pulled a sheet of paper towards him. Then he thought better of it, rang the bell for a Shorthand Clerk, and said, "To Headquarters. 'The Officer nominated for the B.E.F. is——'" and stopped to light his pipe. The Clerk stood rigidly with notebook

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in hand till Kirk, after a long wait, said aimlessly, "What's the day of the month?" The clerk told him and Kirk, moving the papers on the desk to gain time, saw, "Conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline," written on the charge-sheet of a coming defaulter.

"Just go away," he said to the clerk, "I'll ring for you presently."

Left alone he made a really earnest attempt to decide what was right, and taking a detached view, said to himself, "Here's a man trusted to detail officers for draft. He knows it's an awkward job so he decides on a roster, putting every man in his order for overseas. He also decides that the roster is to be worked to rigidly, that Officers begging to be advanced on the list for early embarkation must be refused, that each man must wait and must take his turn. So far so good. That means that Tennant goes to France."

Of course there was Mrs. Tennant, but many officers were married nowadays and there

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were no children. Besides, he was next on the roster. That, after all, was the whole thing.

Eva Tennant would go and live with her mother—but would she? Suppose she decided to stay in Midurbia? She had plenty of friends there. Well, and suppose she did? “I’m not a blackguard,” Kirk said to himself, “and Eva is as straight as a die,” and all the time he knew the danger ahead, as a man crossing open country under fire.

“David and Uriah the Hittite!” he whispered at last. “Good God! I wonder if that is what people will say?”

Then the phrase, “Interests of the Service,” started drumming in his head till he got up and walked across the tent. “Well, damn it, what *are* the Interests of the Service?” he muttered, and some little vein of reasoning, out of control for the moment, said “The roster!”

The canvas flap opened and Tennant came in. “Glad I got you alone, sir,” he said. “Do you mind if I sit down? Thanks.”

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Captain Kirk looked him over rather uncomfortably and said, "What's to do?"

"Who's going to France?" Tennant asked, throwing his stick and gloves on the table.

The question was jerked out so viciously that Kirk sat back in his chair and frowned. After all it was his Orderly Room and he was still Second in Command.

"Why?" he asked quietly.

"Because if I'm to be detailed it's a damned shame!" Tennant said hotly. "Why can't Smith go? He isn't married and I am!"

Kirk waited a moment and then said. "I don't see what that's got to do with it. Will you please explain?"

"Certainly," Tennant answered slowly, "I will explain." Then, after coughing nervously, he added, "You thought I wasn't looking last night, didn't you?"

"I asked you to explain, Mr. Tennant," Kirk said, "not to set conundrums."

"Look here!" Tennant broke out, putting his hands on the arms of the chair as though

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about to rise, "May I speak to you as man to man, or am I in the Orderly Room?"

"If you will moderate your voice," Kirk answered, "you may speak as you say, 'man to man,' but please be brief."

"Right!" Tennant said. "Then listen. I don't think you or anyone else would accuse me of having 'cold feet?'"

"I certainly wouldn't," Kirk answered, "and if anyone else did it would be untrue. I can vouch for that."

"Exactly! Well, what I want to say is that my wife is all I have in the World and, to be quite straight, I've no particular anxiety to play the part of Uriah the Hittite!"

Then, as the other kept silence, "Do you understand me, Captain Kirk, or must I elaborate?"

Kirk bit his lip. "And who is 'David' may I ask?" he said, and as he spoke the Sergeant-Major came in, saluted, and noting the look on the two faces, apologised and withdrew.

When the curtain had fallen and it seemed

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safe to speak, Tennant said, " Well, after all, who detailed Uriah for the forefront of the battle, and who's detailing me ? "

Kirk let his chair tilt back to the table and began sketching aimlessly on the blotting paper with a chalk pencil. He was thinking hard and the blue lines made squares and triangles till, as he stopped to speak, the weird tracings showed up a quaint, gabled house with a hill behind, only to vanish into scribbles on examination.

Perhaps it was the result of a sleepless night, or the general overwrought condition of his nerves, but a little scene came back from years long past and Kirk stood in imagination in a beautiful rose garden, on the edge of tears.

" There is only one rule in life," he remembered his father saying, " and that is to do what you know to be right. Not what you think, Sonny, but what you know, and the harder it is to do, the more certain you can be that it is right ! "

That was quite a long time ago and his mind

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ran over forgotten incidents coming nearer and nearer to the present till he recollected himself and said, "So you think I want to send you away so that I can make love to your wife? That's it, is it? Well, then you can go on thinking it," and after a pause he added, "and you can go out of this Orderly Room."

Then to stop further conversation he rang the bell.

In the evening when the Major had returned, Kirk went across to his tent:

"Look here, Major," he said, "you and I have always been good pals ever since you licked me in the Quad at Rossall. Now I want you to help me, and help me all you can. Will you do it?"

The Major's smile changed to a frown, "What the devil do you mean?" he asked, "by saying 'will I do it?' Eh? I say, what the devil do you mean? You and I don't gush but—— well, really I don't know what to say! After all these years you ask me, will I help you if I can!"

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“Sorry, old man,” Kirk said, “I’m very upset and the worst of it is I can’t tell you what it’s about. You must take me on trust !”

The Major said, “Look here, Jim, when you want to insult me, please don’t do it in my tent ! I never asked you any questions and don’t intend to. Say what you want and if I can do it, it’s done !”

Kirk got up and put his hand on the Major’s arm, “I want to drop a step in rank,” he said, “and go out to France again as a Lieutenant to fill this vacancy.”

“But, Jim——”

“You promised !” Kirk said, “didn’t you ?”

The Major looked into the sleepless eyes and pale face, saw in retrospect the many happy days they had spent together, he and Kirk, in England, Egypt, and France ; saw the bloody trenches with rows of wooden crosses rising daily behind the Line and sighed.

“All right, Jim,” he said, “I don’t profess to understand but I’ve promised. Put it through yourself, I really couldn’t do it !”

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Three weeks later as Billie and young Bird sat one Sunday afternoon on the very window seat where Captain Kirk had fidgeted through an evening, Tennant said, "Seen the papers? Lot of our chaps got knocked out in that show."

Eva Tennant looked up a little sadly, "No," she said, "I don't read the casualty lists. Who is it this time?"

"Oh! a lot of Sappers and N.C.O.'s, Captain Underwood, you wouldn't know him, old Percy dangerously wounded, and Kirk killed."

Chapter X

G.S.

AFTER Captain Kirk's death Billie felt more than ever fretful and took to lonely walks, living again the last year, wondering what the Stickers were doing and when he would go out to them again, till one lovely morning he was sent for by the Major and told that he was to go before a Medical Board next day.

"Can I take a note from you, sir, to say that I can go anywhere and do anything?" he asked. "I must get passed for G.S., sir, really I must!"

The Major laughed. "I'm afraid the Board wouldn't take my opinion," he said, "but you can show them this letter from France."

Billie said, "Thank you, sir," took the letter and read:—

“ Nth Field Coy. R.E., B.E.F.

DEAR MAJOR,

Can you do anything to get Impett back to us ? We miss him badly. Among other things No. 4 Section wants a new sergeant, vice Armstrong wounded some weeks ago, and the O.C. is waiting for Impett's opinion. I think this will show you his value to us as a Section Officer.

Best of luck,

Yours,

D. E. HOYLE, Capt.”

Billie felt a blush running up his cheek and stuffed the letter into his pocket in a ball.

“ Just hand that into the Board,” the Major said, “ and trust to your luck. 8.11 train in the morning.”

“ Thank you, sir,” Billie answered, and went up to the entrenching ground in a state of mental intoxication. That his real Major in France should be waiting for his opinion seemed an impossibility. Anyway they had not promoted Corporal Prince.

Next day Billie found himself once more at the Barracks where he had first been classed "Home Service," and, after digesting all the illustrated papers, followed an Orderly into another room.

"Well, Mr. Impett," the President said, "how are we now?"

Billie looked up, saw the same little civilian doctor adjust his eyeglasses, and said desperately, "First rate, sir!" Presently, he supposed, the little man would rake up something that would cast him "Home Service" for ever, though it was difficult to imagine what it could be. The last time it was Doris Seabrook and the brandy and soda. Doris! Doris had promised faithfully to put things right. But what could a girl do against a Medical Board?

"I've got a letter from France here, sir," Billie said, "my O.C. asked me to show it to the Board."

The Colonel took it, wrote "G.S.?" on a slip of paper, and passed them both to his associate, who, after adjusting his glasses

very carefully, said aloud, "I think General Service, sir?"

Billie looked imploringly at the Colonel, who said, "Yes, I think so," and began to make an entry on a form.

"Thank you, sir!" Billie said wildly, but the little civilian doctor took off his glasses, and using them as a pointer said, "You're thanking the wrong person, young man. Last time you came here the Board had grave reasons for doubting your fitness. You were one of those difficult cases, a young man returned from overseas who is determined to get out again at all costs. All to your credit, of course, but Medical Boards are constituted, among other reasons, to prevent the return to Expeditionary Forces of men who are not really fit. It came to the knowledge of the Board that you had been obliged to resort to stimulants one afternoon though quite unaccustomed to taking them, and the Board very rightly put you back for further consideration. Since then the person who—er—administered the stimulant in question has

G.S.

explained the circumstances so fully, and, if I may say it, so very bravely, that—er—the President has intimated to me that he is entirely satisfied.”

Billie said, “Thank you, sir,” once more, saluted with a special click of the heels and fled to the nearest telegraph office.

“O.C. Nth Reserve Field Coy. R.E., Midurbia,” the first wire read, “passed General Service AAA please may I go on embarkation leave urgent private affairs AAA am reporting to-night AAA Impètt,” and the second which was quite untelegraphic in its profusion, “Dear Doris AAA Medical Board has passed me G.S. thanks to you AAA we are all square now AAA Am coming to see you as soon as I can get leave AAA do write and tell me how you did it AAA I think you are wonderful AAA expect to get back to France in a week or two AAA Billie Impett AAA.”

An hour later Doris Seabrook, who had just come in from the village, found a telegram lying on the morning-room table and picked

it up. She read it through carefully and after putting two ornaments straight on the mantelpiece, the telegram still in her hand, went upstairs to her room.

Billie was passed G.S. and would be out in France again before you could say snip. And now they were "all square!"

"All square!" she said to herself. "I wonder if men ever think; or do they only just do things?"

Then she read it through again. "Do write and tell me how you did it." "Yes, that's likely," she said, "and he's coming here, is he?" "I think you are wonderful." "Yes," Doris murmured to herself, "I really think I must be!" and after standing before the window for some time, trying hard not to cry, she turned round into the room and said, "Damn!"

A few days later Billie bade farewell to his tent and Captain Kirk's dog, shook hands with everyone that he came across, and fled down to the station about half an hour before train

time. There, to his astonishment, he met the Babes in the Wood, pretending to examine the bookstall, one eye on the station entrance.

"Hullo!" he said, "you're not going on this train, are you?"

Bird looked at Leigh who simply nudged him in reply, and Billie, to fill in an awkward moment, added, "Wish you two were coming with me."

Both boys looked uncomfortable, till Leigh said desperately, "That's what we came for, Mr. Impett, I mean we wanted to see you off, of course, but we want to know if you can get us out to your Company."

"Well I'm blessed!" said Billie, and then, as both the Babes came to "attention" and saluted, Billie turned round to find the Major behind his shoulder.

"Had to come down to the station for *The Times*, you know," the Major said, "thought I'd kill two birds with one stone. Train on time?"

Billie said he did **not** know and bought the first and most ornate magazine he could see.

“ Well, give my regards to Captain Hoyle,” the Major went on. “ I don’t know him from Adam except by repute, but we’ve corresponded. And if there is anything I can do, you know, just write and tell me what it is. Well, good-bye and good luck ! ”

Billie shook hands and then followed the Major up the platform.

“ I beg your pardon, sir,” he said, “ but there’s something you can do for me now if you will.”

“ That so, Impett ? ” the Major answered. “ Well, name it, and if it’s on the cards it’s done ! ”

“ Send those two boys out to the ‘ Stickers ’ when they ask for them,” Billie said.

“ That wouldn’t be easy,” the Major answered, after making room for an old lady who certainly required it, and Billie replied, “ I know the difficulties, sir, but they’re not as great as the gap in the line at Le Cateau in 1914.”

The Major stared. That was where he had got his D.S.O. “ Now who the devil told

you about that ? ” he said angrily, “ there’s too much gossip in this place ! Perfectly ridiculous ! Two children like those boys to go to a Field Company that isn’t even in their Division ! ” and as the Major simply walked straight out of the gate Billie saluted with an unseen grin and went back to the bookstall.

“ I think it will be all right,” he said, “ but you mustn’t breathe a word. If you do you will spoil the whole thing. I’ll speak to Captain Hoyle about it when I get out.”

“ We won’t say a word to anyone,” Bird answered earnestly, “ and it’s very good of you. We—er—we wondered, Mr. Impett, if you would take this,” and out of his pocket the boy produced a very neat wrist watch on a broad band. “ It was the only thing we could find in this place that would be any good, and you’ve broken yours, haven’t you ? ”

“ Now look here,” Billie said, “ it’s most awfully good of you, really, and I’ll take it like a shot, and when you come out there you’ll see it on my wrist ! Here’s the train.”

Then, after the usual futile remarks made quite prematurely, as false warnings sounded along the platform, Billie sat down in a corner seat, bound for home.

Chapter XI

The Compromise

WHEN Doris heard that Billie was coming she decided, for some feminine reason, to go with his people to the station. Probably because she would have done so under ordinary circumstances, and the reduction of the situation to the ordinary seemed the safest.

So Billie, on getting out of the train, kissed his mother and Kitty, saluted his father rather to the old man's distress, and said, "How do you do, Miss Seabrook?" which was not at all in the vein of his telegram.

"I want to speak to Doris," he added to his mother. "My valise is in the van. I won't be a minute," and the two strolled up the platform away from the exit.

"Look here, Miss Seabrook," Billie began, "you and I had a row once and I told you it was your fault that I was cast for Home Service."

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Doris said, "Yes," rather faintly.

"When I went before the Board the little doctor man said you had acted very bravely. I don't know what he meant, but I like brave people. That's why I like Captain Hoyle and my Major and Sapper Bellis. You simply can't scare them. However frightened I get myself they're always just the same, and I'm very glad you're brave because I rather liked you before."

"That's very kind of you," Doris said sarcastically. "Was that all you wanted to say?"

"I think it was," Billie answered, "except that I thought of coming to see you to-morrow afternoon."

"I am afraid I shall be out," Doris said coldly, but as Billie was evidently thinking of something else, she added after a while, "Oh, no! to-morrow's Thursday, isn't it, I was thinking it was Friday."

"What's that?" Billie asked. "Yes, to-morrow's Thursday. Well, I'll come over on chance."

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Doris went off alone while the others were getting the baggage into a taxi, and said to herself, "Doris Seabrook, you're shameless!" and after a few streets she added, "Well, I don't care if I am, he's worth it!"

Things were much the same at home, Billie thought, there was a new housemaid who objected to cleaning his Sam Browne, and someone had moved the furniture in the morning-room to cover a hole in the carpet, otherwise things were just the same.

At breakfast next morning Mr. Impett opened the paper and said, "I can't help thinking they made a mistake when they got rid of Asquith. Very sound man." Then, as no one seemed inclined to answer, he went on. "Makes all the difference in the world when you have a tried man at the head of affairs."

"We've got him," Billie said. "There are no flies on Douggie Haig!"

"Haig?" Mr. Impett asked, "oh! you mean in France. I was thinking of Headquarters."

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“Used to be at St. Omer, Dad,” Billie said, “couldn’t get in without a pass, I remember. Now they’ve moved somewhere else.”

“I said at the time,” the old man went on, “that they would miss the wise counsel of the elder statesmen——”

“Your bacon is going cold, dear,” Mrs. Impett said automatically. “What are you two doing this morning?”

“I’m going across to the Seabrooks’,” Billie replied, “will you come, K.?”

Kitty said, “Yes,” and Billie opened a couple of letters from Midurbia and finished his breakfast.

“What are you going for?” Kitty asked later, as they passed the bull field on their way to the village. “Anything particular?” and as Billie said nothing she added, “I think Doris and Dick Barrett must be engaged.”

Billie was lighting a cigarette at the time, but after letting the match burn down to his fingers he threw it on the ground. “Why?” he asked, staring at his sister.

The Compromise

“ Well, I don’t really know anything,” Kitty answered, “ but they both seem so sad.”

“ What a reason ! ” Billie laughed, but somehow the joy of the morning seemed to have vanished. That had not entered into his calculations. After all, why should they not ? Barrett was well off, was not likely to be killed or maimed, they were great friends, and really there did not seem any reason against it. All the same, he walked more slowly, and once nearly made up his mind to go back. Then he remembered that he owed Doris the very best thanks he could lay tongue to and began to wonder how he would put it. Once upon a time he would have said it was jolly good of her and she would have said, “ Oh ! that’s all right ! ” and there would have been an end of it.

Then he recalled their walk on the station and realised that he had not been paying attention to what Doris had said, for he could not remember it. He would start again anyway.

“ You needn’t stay with me when I meet

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Doris," he said to his sister, and Kitty, who for years had postponed curiosity with the certain knowledge that it was only for a time, said, "All right, I'll go into the greenhouse. I want to pat the toad."

"Look here, Miss Seabrook," Billie began, "I'm afraid I was rude last night on the station. Let's sit down and have a chat."

"You weren't rude at all, Mr. Impett," Doris said, sitting in the library. "Whatever made you think that?"

"Well, I mean I didn't make enough of what you did for me. The little doctor man said straight out that I hadn't got to thank the Board, but to thank you. He did really. However did you do it? I asked you to write and tell me, but you never wrote at all."

"No, I didn't," Doris said slowly, "and I'm not going to now. You accused me of telling tales and said if I didn't put it right I should never feel comfortable again. So I put it right and now you see I'm quite happy!" and she smiled in a way that

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reminded Billie of his sister's statement that Doris and Dick Barrett "looked so sad."

"By the way," Billie said, "if I don't see Dick Barrett again before I go will you remember me to him? Jolly decent chap, isn't he? He's been very good to Kitty, used to take her across the bull field, you know, and so on. More than I'd do any day. He must be rather a plucky chap."

"Yes, he's very nice," Doris said. "When are you going back to France?"

"Oh! any day," Billie answered, "I'm on final leave. Why?"

Doris, who thought that was the silliest question she had ever heard, said, "Oh! nothing, only Dick Barrett's reporting to-morrow. His exemption has been cancelled."

"Good heavens!" Billie said; "but what did they cancel it for? He was jolly useful here, wasn't he?"

"They didn't cancel it till he asked them to do it," she said, "and I don't think he was right to ask them."

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Billie was not quite certain whether his path had been made more smooth or more difficult, and hoped he would not have to speak for a minute or two.

"But men don't think," Doris went on after a little while, "it doesn't occur to them, that what they do may make people miserable. They just go along doing things and perhaps say, 'Thanks awfully,' and then go on and do something else."

Now Billie was fully aware that 'Thanks awfully' was one of his constant remarks, for he had been chaffed about it ever since his schooldays, so he stopped thinking about Dick Barrett and turned his head.

He tried to catch the girl's eye, but it was fixed on the bookcase opposite, so he lay back on the settee and stared at her pretty little profile, while Doris, feeling that if she moved a muscle she would weep, sat rigidly, her chin in her hands.

After some minutes, during which a rain-cloud coming late in the day had darkened the room so that it seemed a little easier to

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talk, Billie slipped along the sofa and just put his arm round the girl, who on the touch gave way and wept.

For a moment Billie was nonplussed, but the danger of their position, alone in an unlighted room, called up that quick decision that Captain Hoyle had noticed in France, and he got up and locked the door.

"You mustn't do that!" Doris said, but Billie said, "I have done. I want to speak to you and I don't want anyone to see you crying, that is, anyone but me. Now look here, Doris dear, things won't ever be the same again in the world. When we first met, well, you know, I began to love you. But you see I haven't finished in France. You do see that, don't you?"

Doris squeezed his hand and nodded her little head.

"You say men go about doing things, and don't think of the results," Billie went on, "but I did, I did really. I lay awake nearly all one night and before I went to sleep I knew that I must finish in France first, that

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I mustn't say a word to you till then. Don't you believe me, Doris dear ? ”

It was almost dark now, and as the girl turned her face up to say “ Yes,” Billie gave her a real good kiss and said, “ That's all right ! Now just you put your hair straight and I'll switch on the light.”

A few minutes later Doris, who was putting some finishing touches to her appearance before a glass, said, “ You know you make me laugh, Bill.”

“ Good ! ” Billie said ; “ but what about ? ”

“ Well, everything ! You're just what I said. You go about doing things ! First you come and I feel happy every time I see you ; then you say, ‘ Send me to France at once or I'll never speak to you again,’ and I do it ; then I'm utterly miserable and you come along, lock the door, kiss me, and I never felt so happy in all my life.”

Billie laughed and put his arm round her. “ I'm jolly glad,” he said. “ When I come back from France we'll be engaged, won't we ? ”

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“ I hope so,” Doris said earnestly. “ Aren’t we engaged now ? ”

“ No ! ” Billie answered imperiously, “ not till I come back ! I’ve made up my mind. It wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“ Well,” Doris said in astonishment, “ I hope you’ve more sense in military matters than I’ve noticed in some others. But of course it’s just as you like.”

“ It’s perfectly clear,” Billie said. “ As soon as I get back from France for good we’ll be engaged. Give me another kiss and let’s look for Kitty ; it’s time I went home.”

Chapter XII

Camouflage



CAMOUFLAGE, strictly speaking, means concealment, from its derivative association with smoke and candles, but the war gave it more than so narrow an office. As used in military matters it generally refers of course to optical deceit, but however that may be the word slipped into the English language about the time that perfected aerial observation brought about the uncomfortable shelling of certain things that mattered; Divisional Headquarters, for instance, batteries, or merely new lines of trench.

There is a tale from Egypt of a Battalion Commander with more than the usual amount of imagination who, on the approach of a hostile plane, formed his men, camels, and transport into the pattern of a traversed trench, and later as food was being comfortably consumed five hundred yards forward

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listened in amusement to a vast number of shells bursting harmlessly in the open. Whether that is strictly true or not, the idea is sound, and perhaps spells Camouflage as well as any other illustration.

On the other hand, an officer of some experience in both Egypt and France was heard to say that he had seen more Camouflage on Victoria Station than ever within range of guns.

Anyway the term is useful as supplying a sub-division of our word "Craft," and has probably not been previously represented in the language from the very lack of its need, for really artful deception has never been a British characteristic.

Billie Impett had just finished learning from his mother's cook how to make a practical brown gravy out of ration supplies, when a wire was brought into the kitchen which read, "You will report Embarkation Officer before noon to-morrow AAA Authority J/469,271/S.29 AAA."

Perhaps the fact that he did not throw the

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telegram into the fire with a "whoop" as Essex threw his hat into the sea when allowed to attack Cadiz, was the beginning of things, but anyway the subsequent happenings were a little artificial. He was leaving England again, maybe for ever, for which reason of course, after the manner of Englishmen, he must 'shut down on sentiment.'

"I'll want breakfast a bit earlier to-morrow, Mother," he said, as he walked into the drawing-room. "Got to be at port of embarkation before noon."

Mrs. Impett put down some knitting, picked it up again, and appeared interested in a stitch. Her mouth twitched a little, but as Billie was trying to make the cat stand on its hind legs she had time to recover and say, "There won't be any difficulty about that, dear. Just ring the bell."

"You're no use as a dancer," Billie remarked to the cat. "You couldn't earn your milk. All right, Mother, I'll get hold of Kitty and tell her to fix it up."

After dinner, which had consisted of certain

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unnoticed food and continuous chatter on the part of Billie to an accompaniment of quite mechanical humour from the rest of the party, Mr. Impett said, "So you're off again! Well, I suppose you're quite glad?"

What stopped Billie immediately saying "yes" must have been an innate sense of caution in speech. "Well, the thing's got to be finished off," he said casually, "the sooner we all get back to work the better. Then we can come home and settle down again."

"Exactly," Mr. Impett said. "Shall we go into the other room?"

After about an hour of strain, during which Mrs. Impett had given a lengthy description of a proposed entertainment for the local wounded, Billie said, "I'm going to speak to Doris Seabrook on the 'phone. Won't be a minute," and closed the door as he went out.

"That you, Doris?" he said. "Good evening . . . what's that? . . . Oh, nothing much, only I wanted to tell you something. . . . Really? Well, why didn't you ring me up? . . . I see. Well, look here. I've just

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got my orders for France and . . . what's that ? . . . First thing to-morrow."

Billie listened patiently and then said, "Hold on, Central, don't cut us off."

"Well, that's the limit!" he said to himself. "I suppose the blessed thing has broken down."

"I say, Central!" he went on, "I was speaking to 1069. . . . Oh! is that you, dear? I'm sorry, I thought they'd cut us off. Well, look here, it's no good you coming to the station, you see the Mater may be there, and you know what mothers are. . . . What's that ? . . . no, but I mean they get sort of upset, you see, and one has to humour them. . . . No, I didn't suppose you were, but I thought I'd just tell you not to. . . . Well, that's all right. If you weren't going to there's no harm done. I say! Have you any use for Valenciennes lace ? . . . Because I can get it by the metre, made right close up to the line. I didn't buy much last time, because I hadn't anyone particular to send it to. . . . Yes. . . . What's that ? . . . Now,

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look here, do you want me to give names over the telephone? . . . Then don't ask silly questions. . . . Yes, of course, I'll write, and mind you do too. . . . Oh! about four or five months I suppose. . . . What's that? . . . Yes, dear, I know, but . . . Yes, Doris dear, but . . ."

The morning room door opened and Billie turned round. "Clear out, K!" he said, "I'll be with you in a minute."

" . . . It's all right, I was speaking to Kitty. They want me in the other room. . . . What's that? . . . Yes, I daresay . . . well, so long, Doris dear. I'm going to ring off. . . . Well, I'm going to anyway, so good night, see you again. So long!"

Billie heard fragments of a protesting voice as he put the instrument away, and then went through the side door into the garden.

On thinking it over afterwards he concluded that he must have been more upset than he had thought, or he would not have found himself in the potting shed behind the wash-house, in rain-damaged uniform and quite

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wet shoes. It really was rather worrying. That was the worst of women ; they always said things that men tried to stop themselves from even thinking. Meanwhile there was the rest of the evening, so Billie got still further wet and strolled into the drawing-room.

“ You’re all wet, dear ! ” Mrs. Impett exclaimed. “ Where have you been ? ”

Billie smiled in a way that he had when he wanted about ten seconds’ time, and then said to his sister, “ Is the cat in here ? ”

“ No,” Kitty answered, “ I haven’t seen her since dinner.”

“ I wonder where she’s got to,” Billie went on, “ I thought I heard something outside, but I couldn’t see her anywhere.”

“ Well, we mustn’t be late,” Mr. Impett remarked presently, which from the early days meant that the women folk had better go to bed, “ and I want a word with Bill, in case I don’t see him to-morrow.”

After Billie had said good night to his mother and Kitty, he settled in a chair by

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the fire in what Captain Hoyle used to describe as a state of "set teeth," and prepared for the worst. But it seemed a long time in coming.

"How are you fixed for money," Mr. Impett asked at last, "got all you want?"

"Good Lord, yes, Dad!" Billie said, "money's no use in France!"

Mr. Impett rubbed his chin. "If you could not give a man money, what on earth *could* you do?"

"Well," he said, "I think I'd better pay something into your account at Cox's."

Billie did not reply at the moment. The fatuity of the thing appalled him. Then he remembered one of Captain Hoyle's sayings by the ruined well at Longueval where they had struck a little store of unexpected food. "Don't refuse a thing because you don't happen to want it yourself, Impett. There are heaps of fellows who do. I'm going to load up my pockets and act Father Christmas in the Line!"

So Billie said, "Oh! thanks very much,

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I don't really need any but if you can spare ten pounds I know what I can do with it."

"Well, that's the great thing," Mr. Impett answered rather pompously, "knowing what to do with it! I'll make it twenty," and getting up, he went across to his desk. "Shall I make it payable to you?" he asked.

"No," Billie said, "pay it to your bank and ask them to see that it is put to the credit of a friend of mine in some local bank at Birkenhead. Here's the address. Better take it down. 'Mrs. Stevens, 69, Bolton Road, Birkenhead.'"

Mr. Impett sat back and put his pen down on the desk. "What's this, Bill?" he asked in astonishment. "It's money due, Dad," Billie said. "She's a widow, mother of one of my Orderlies who got killed at Vierstraate. She's very hard up. Just make a note of the address and let's go to bed. I'm tired."

Half-way through breakfast next morning Billie passed a secret signal to Kitty and then said, "I've got a few things to do so if you

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don't mind, Mother, I'll just slip off for ten minutes," and adjourned to the potting shed.

There, to his annoyance, he found John the gardener, who wanted to remind him of the early days when he, John, had strafed 'Master William' for breaking lights in the pansy frames. Billie, however, had not been in the Line for nothing, so he shook hands with the astounded old man and told him to go away at once.

After a few minutes Kitty Impett ran past the corner of the wash house and flung her arms round Billie's neck. Twice Billie nearly spoke, but checked himself in time, till presently the girl relaxed and said, "Good-bye, Bill! There's nobody loves you as much as I do!"

Billie, with a desperate attempt at his usual voice, said, "So long, old girl. See you again in a month or two. Let me know how you go on."

"It's absolute pax, Bill?" Kitty whispered.

Billie coughed a little, and after staring up at the red brick stables till he could speak

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properly, answered in the cherished formula that seemed to belong so particularly to the potting shed, "Absolute pax and all assistance!"

Then, as Kitty still held on to him, he added, "There's a spider in your hair!"

Chapter XIII

France

BILLIE'S Field Company had gone on rest and it was just as his 'real' Major, as he called him, was riding in from a visit to a local monastery, that a wire came in from the Base informing them that 2nd Lieut. W. R. Impett would arrive at a certain station at 3.30 p.m.

"Better send transport, Hoyle," the Major remarked, "he might have some baggage. Went away with nothing, I know, but he's probably brought something back." Captain Hoyle said, "Yes, sir, I think I'll go down myself."

"No need for that," the Major answered, "I'm going that way for a ride. Must get some exercise you know."

So Billie, to his huge astonishment, was met by a batman with spare saddle horse, an R.E. Limber, one of the most practical

wheeled things on earth, Captain Hoyle, and the Officer Commanding the Nth Field Company R.E., generally known as the "Stickers."

"Just out for a ride," the Major said, "and saw your train coming along. Thought we might as well wait and ride home together."

Billie felt inclined to give fifty pounds to a charity. "It's awfully good of you, sir," he said, ignoring the Major's excuse for his presence, and then turning to Captain Hoyle he hesitated for something to say, till the twinkle in Hoyle's eye reminded him that the occasion was not one for speech, and they just smiled.

It was good to be back again, Billie thought. England of course was England, and would be for umpteen years, but to be back with the Stickers, and particularly with Hoyle, seemed like the realization of an impossibility.

"Had a good time?" the Major asked on the way home. "How's the shoulder. All right again?"

"Splendid, sir," Billie answered. "It was

awfully good of Captain Hoyle to write and ask for me to be sent out again at once. I had a bit of a job getting passed 'G.S.' but a friend of mine was able to help me a little."

"That was lucky," the Major said, "nothing like a friend at Court. What's his name?"

Billie rode on for a few yards and then said, "Hold up, old girl! The mare stumbles a little, sir."

"Well, here we are," the Major went on as they reined up at a farm. "You sleep in the kitchen with Carstairs."

In the morning, as Billie went out to help Captain Hoyle with a harness inspection, the Colonel Commanding Divisional Royal Engineers, known as the C.R.E., rode into the yard.

"Good morning, Impett," he said, "glad to see you back again. We've missed you at times. Where's the O.C.?"

Billie saluted, said the major was in the farm, and almost walked into the central

manure heap with astonishment. That Hoyle should meet him at the station was not surprising; that the Major should do likewise and obviously cover up his motive by an untruth, had come with a shock; but that the C.R.E., who broke captains and recommended quite insignificant subalterns for rewards, should not only remember his name but should say that he had been "missed," was surely the limit. So he went on his way to the shed where the harness was kept and walked up to Hoyle.

"There's something doing, sir," he said, as a Driver moved out of hearing. "The C.R.E. wants to see the Major, and his horse is blown."

Hoyle passed a breeching strap through his hand and said, "Blown?"

"Well, it couldn't go much further at the same pace, sir," Billie answered, as he noted a rusty stirrup, "and the Colonel is pretty careful with horseflesh as a rule."

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“ Carry on with this job,” Hoyle answered.
“ I’d better go into the Billet.”

So Billie called up the Mounted Sergeant and asked him when the man responsible for that particular stirrup had deserted the Service, because such things interested him.

Sergeant Greenfield, on whom sarcasm was quite lost, said, “ He’s still with the Company, sir ; I’ll fetch him,” and Billie said, “ Do.”

“ Sorry to disturb you, Major,” the C.R.E. said, taking a gingerbread from an opened tin, “ but the other Division has lost a sector of Front Line trench and we’ve got to get it back. Short rest, only three days, but it can’t be helped. When can you move ? ”

“ Two hours, sir,” the Major answered at once, and Captain Hoyle slipped quietly out into the yard.

“ We’re moving in two hours, Impett,” he said, “ I’ll take on the transport if you’ll warn

the other officers, and get the sappers together. Going back into the Line."

"Right, sir," Billie said. "We'll be ready before you are. I'll fix the meal for eleven o'clock. Would you mind arranging things so that the drivers can come at that time? I'll feed the Line Piquet at 11.30 and the kitchen gear can be packed up at about 12.15."

Billie disappeared whistling, "Oh! you naughty, naughty, naughty little girl!" and Hoyle, strolling off to the horse lines understood why for months he had felt disappointed with the other subalterns.

Two hours later Hoyle reported "All correct" to the Major and began to clear the transport up the muddy lane, while 869 Sapper Bellis, who had been hanging round on the chance of a word with Billie, said to his next door man, "'E's just come at the right time 'as Mr. Impett. Last time as I saw 'im 'e was taking his Governor out to a show in London. 'E's in for another now, judging

from the gunfire last night, and I'm going to be 'is orderly.'"

"Fixed it with the Sergeant-Major?" the other asked, but 869 Sapper Bellis, in the immediate intoxication of a return to the Line with Billie, said, "No blinking fear! 'E'll see to that! You watch 'im!"

Just as it was getting dark the little column wound slowly past a church and halted at the cross roads. Drivers dismounted, the sappers sat down at the side of the road, while the Major disappeared into a house on the left to see "Brigade."

"We're to go right in, Hoyle," he said half an hour later, "all four sections. P. Q., and R. trenches are gone and it means a new communication trench."

Hoyle said, "Very good, sir; we can get transport as far as the Brasserie. Suppose they're going to give us some working parties?"

"No," the Major answered, "every man

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who can hold a rifle is wanted in the supports."

Hoyle swore. The Sappers had been up at six that morning, had marched seventeen miles in full kit that afternoon, and the horses, who had wanted a rest so badly, were almost done.

"Can you give me three hours, sir?" he asked. "We'll park the transport in the old place, and rest."

"If you think three hours necessary, Hoyle," the Major said. "You can have it, but I'm bound to say I'd like to leave at eight o'clock."

Hoyle looked at his watch. "Quarter to six," he said, "I'm thinking of the horses. You see you can talk to sappers, but horses don't quite understand everything you say."

The Major listened for a moment to the infernal racket from the Line and said, "All right, Hoyle. Suppose we pull out at eight prompt? That suit you?" and Captain

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Hoyle said, "Perfectly, sir," because something in the Major's tone advised him to stop arguing.

"Now, look here, Impett," he said, as he ran across Billie in the dark, "it's ten minutes to six. We're got to go straight in at eight, prompt, all four sections. Any amount of corrugated iron, trench frames, duck boards, wire, screw-pickets, sandbags, picks and shovels to go with us. Horses are all done, and the stores are to be collected from the dump at Piccadilly Circus. That's about a mile away. We've got to feed, water, and rest the whole Company, sappers, drivers, horses, and all. You've been on leave; just think as hard as you can."

Billie said, "Lots of horses in a field the other side of the church, sir. I've been talking to an A.S.C. Mounted Sergeant; has a brother with us, Driver Chadwick. He says they exercise them every day, so they can't be working, and the Sappers will be all right, sir, as soon as they've had some grub. It's only

their legs and feet. They can dig like blazes ; you see if they don't, sir."

Hoyle laughed. " I didn't mean to suggest horse stealing," he said. " You must have been to some Wild West picture shows in London."

" No, really, sir," Billie replied, " it's quite all right. I'll be back in a quarter of an hour."

Hoyle hesitated for a moment and then realised that Billie had left him as he heard an invisible voice say, " That you, Driver Chadwick ? Where's your brother ? Oh ! here you are, Sergeant. Well, just come along with me."

" You see it's this way," Billie said, as he went up the road, " our horses are done and we have to go straight on to the Brasserie. Only about three miles, but you know the road ; all cut up. Now I want six four-horse teams from the A.S.C. Won't take them under fire, you know, at least, I hope not, and it will be jolly good exercise."

Driver Chadwick grinned in the dark, and his brother, the Sergeant, said, "I'm afraid it can't be done, sir. You see we're responsible for all those horses."

"Quite," Billie said, "and to-night we're responsible for the Front Line, so that's all right! Who's the best man to tackle?"

"Well, sir, if the Adjutant says it's all right——"

"Yes," Billie answered, "I know all about that, but you see the Adjutant won't."

"Mr. Evans might agree, sir, but he hasn't got the authority."

Billie walked on for a little. He knew it was no earthly use to deal with 'Authority' in the matter. "Who's in charge of the Horse Lines?" he asked.

"Mr. Smith, sir," the Sergeant answered.

"Yes, but I mean who does all the work? Who's the Mounted Sergeant in charge?"

"I am, sir."

"That's fine!" Billie said. "Just pass the word round that I can do what I like and

then you clear off. If there's a row I'll say I went in and pinched what I wanted."

The Sergeant said nothing for twenty yards, so Billie said, "Here! talk to him Chadwick!"

"He's all right," Driver Chadwick said to his brother, "he'll do whatever he says."

A grunted conversation went on between the brothers for some time, and then the A.S.C. Sergeant said, "Well, here we are, sir. Just wait there till I have a word with the Line Picket."

Half an hour later twenty-four fresh horses came quietly up to where the Company had parked its transport, and Billie found Captain Hoyle explaining to Sergeant Greenfield that orders were orders and it simply could not be helped.

"We don't want any more than these, sir," Billie said, "quite fresh, and they'll work either lead or wheel, near side or off; had the pick of the multitude; only Polly and Prince always work as a pair."

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Hoyle almost gasped. "How many have you got?" he asked.

"Twenty-four, sir, all ready for hooking in. If you'll get your food, sir, I'll come and get mine when you've finished. And, Sergeant Greenfield, will you please get hold of the Company Quartermaster-Sergeant and tell him from me to see that these A.S.C. drivers get a meal before they go back to their Lines? There are some tinned peaches left that we got from Birkenhead."

Hoyle said, "All right! see you in half an hour," while Sergeant Greenfield who, as a lover of horses, was overjoyed at not having to turn his own out in their overworked condition, said, "You can leave it to me, sir; and if you don't mind me saying it, you've just come back at the right time!"

At five minutes to eight Captain Hoyle kicked the mud off his boots and went through into Brigade Headquarters to find the Major.

"Ready to move, sir," he said.

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The Major looked at his watch and smiled. It really was nice to feel that when you said you wished a certain thing done it was sure to happen ; and he had been worrying just a little in his conversation with the Brigadier as time slipped by.

“Hullo, Hoyle !” the Brigadier said. “Too bad to drag you back so soon but it couldn’t be helped. Fortune of war ! Take it as a compliment, you know, what ? How are your horses ? Pretty well ‘all in,’ I suppose.”

“They’ll manage it, sir,” Hoyle said. “Impett—don’t know whether you’ve met Impett, sir—has managed to pick out enough to stay the trip. Thundering good lad !”

“Impett !” the Brigadier said, “Impett ! Yes, of course, the howitzer fellow, you mean ? Haven’t met him, but remember he was mentioned in despatches. Well, you’ll need some horses to-night, the way between here and the Brasserie has been under fire all day and they’ve landed a few on the crown of the road. I’d reckon about double time if I were

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you, it really isn't fit to take wheeled transport. Well, good night, and good luck ! Good night, Major, see you in the morning at nine."

Hoyle walked out behind the Major and said, "Impett's pinched twenty-four draught horses from the A.S.C.," but the Major, who was too experienced to take official cognisance of irregularities, made answer with regard to some other details and went off down the road. He never went into the Line first night if it could be helped, because there were always a hundred administrative things to be arranged, before he could actually settle down to R.E. work.

Someone said, "Walk, march !" and with a slip of hooves on the pavé road Billie's "Volunteers," as he called them, moved east, so that the rumbling of wagons came in to drown some of the Sappers' remarks. Which was just as well.

After about half a mile Hoyle heard shouts in the rear and sent Billie back for information.

“It’s the — Field Coy., sir,” Billie explained, as he trotted to the head of the column; “they’re trying to get past us, yelling out ‘feel your right’ and our chaps won’t give way.”

“Of course not,” Hoyle said, “against the rules to ‘double bank’ on a road. Besides, why the blazes did their Brigades lose the Line? If we’ve got to pull in again as soon as we go on rest, the least they can do is to be civil. Tell our fellows to hold on.”

Billie said, “No need, sir,” and dropped back to hear what was happening.

There was a rough bit of road, and as the leading team slowed down at the obstruction, he heard a driver say persuasively, “Polly! Prince! Polly! Polly! Prince!” then a grunt of satisfaction as the waggon got on to firm ground again and the team nodded their heads in the dark as though saying, “Easy!”

One after the other the transport and Sappers came past till the end of the column

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drew abreast, a G.S. waggon laden with corrugated iron, and again Billie heard the infuriated cry of the following Field Company, "Feel your right!" which, of course, means "Get off the centre of the road and let us pass!"

No one took any notice for a matter of fifty yards, and then a driver, turning round in his saddle, said, "You feel the back of your blinkin' head, and you'll see where it's swelled!"

"That will do!" Billie said. "You've got the right of way, keep it and don't talk." Then, as someone spoke in an undertone, he added, "Sergeant Greenfield, take the name of the next man who speaks; except to his horse."

Sergeant Greenfield said, "Very good, sir," and almost at the same moment a driver remarked, "Can't run no blinkin' bluff on us! Can they, old girl?"

Billie trotted back to Hoyle in suppressed laughter to repeat the conversation, when a

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sentry halted the column and a strange officer asked who was in charge.

“They’re shelling the road every now and then,” he said, “and they’ve made a mess of it. Trying to stop us getting up to repair the line.”

“All right,” Hoyle said. “Thanks very much. Walk, march!”

“Just take my place, Impett,” he added a little later, “I’m going up the road,” and as Hoyle and his orderly trotted into the dark Billie still heard vexed remarks in the rear.

“I’d like to know who that driver was who was talking to his horse,” he thought, “it was really funny. I must write and tell Doris!”

Then the leading waggon halted, and Billie found Hoyle and his orderly staring at a black gap where an unlucky shell had found a culvert carrying the road over a little stream, while one by one the drivers called “Halt!” and more trouble came up from the following Field Company.

“Can’t cross that,” Hoyle said. “We’ll

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have to take the ditch and go round. What sort of a team have you got there ? ”

Polly and Prince moved a little in sympathy with the “lead” driver who heard the question. It was almost a reflection !

“Quite all right, sir,” Billie answered, and went across the road to see what he had to get over. There was a ditch about eighteen inches deep, which did not matter, but beyond that a bank rose a solid three feet above road level.

“Better get some sappers, sir,” he remarked, and just as Hoyle was about to agree, a shrapnel shell burst slightly to one side, and a chunk of metal ricocheted off some screw-pickets in the waggon and hummed away to oblivion.

“Can’t waste any time,” Hoyle said, remembering previous cases of wounded and dead horses on a narrow road. “Better hook in another pair off the next waggon, and get through.”

“Beg your pardon, sir,” a driver said. “Can we try it first as we are ? ”

“ All right ! ” Hoyle answered, “ pick your own way and good luck, but hurry up ! ”

The two drivers, one behind the other as they rode the near horses of the team, exchanged a word or two, closed their legs, and with a little chink of chains the teams wheeled gently to the right and walked off the road.

If it had been light anyone could have seen that the horses were excited by the staccato way they used their feet, because when a good rider faces a difficulty his horse fully understands the situation, added to which a horse can see near-to things on the blackest night, as anyone knows who has seen or heard loose horses galloping in the dark over broken ground.

There was a little stumbling and a check, followed by a thud as the front wheels dropped into the ditch, and then as one horse came down on its knees and recovered, Hoyle heard the leading driver say desperately, “ Left

incline ! It's too steep ! Polly ! Prince !
Polly ! Polly ! Prince ! ”

Something creaked, and with a jolt and a rumble the waggon reared up, topped the bank, and passed over into the field.

“ Fine ! ” Hoyle exclaimed, “ we couldn't have done that with our own horses, Impett ; but what the devil's this ? ”

Billie watched the next team come up, and halt before trying the bank, heard Driver Chadwick say, “ Take it on a left incline, Jim says it's too steep ! ” and then answered, “ I beg your pardon, sir ? ”

“ Something's coming up the road at a trot,” Hoyle said. “ Can't be anything of ours ! ”

“ ——— Field Company, sir,” Billie replied instinctively. “ Must have pulled out and got round our rear. “ Damn their impertinence ! ” Hoyle answered. “ Hold on with that waggon till I see who they are.”

The sound of the trotting team came nearer, accompanied by remarks of various

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kinds from the column, and then, as Hoyle realised that they were coming on without an attempt at feeling their way up the broken road, he touched his horse with the spur and went to meet them. "Halt there!" he cried, and as nothing happened, blew his whistle to catch the ear of the drivers.

It was no use. The excitement of having passed the "Stickers" overbore any tendency to discretion, so Hoyle wheeled his horse quickly and let them by, a four-horse team and waggon at the trot, while Billie, who was close up to the gap, put his horse at the bank and landed somewhere in the field.

Driver Chadwick steadied his pair, and with a cryptic remark turned in his saddle to see what would happen.

What did happen, of course, was that the leading pair of the offending team trotted blithely up to the gap, saw it, and baulked with a suddenness that unseated their drivers, and were then pushed gently over the edge by

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the pair behind them, reined back against the impetus of the waggon.

Billie hoped they were not hurt, asked if his team and waggon were all clear, and said, "Left incline! Walk, march! Make straight for me," while Driver Chadwick, with a beautiful grin, realised that the occasion was one beyond the use of mere words, so spat deliberately into the dark.

Chapter XIV

The Weasel

AT one time, of course, the fauna of the Line consisted of certain unnamable insects, some overfed cats and dogs who plodded past extremely fat rats in an unheeding manner, and the inhabitants of the Horse Lines, but the time came when the German Front parted at certain points and our troops moved east into real country. That happened, for instance, on the Somme in 1916, when a hare tried to run across the front of a Scotch Brigade going into action, and died as a superstitious corporal cleared a spent round from his rifle and wondered if the Sergeant-Major had noticed ; but it was not until the " Stickers " bivouacked east of Longueval that 869 Sapper Bellis made the acquaintance of his weasel.

Billie Impett, Corporal Hope, and Bellis

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were tracing a new bit of Line in the open, pegging the tape on the ground, with traverses, machine-gun salients, and so on, just as a giant might draw a full-sized pattern with a piece of white chalk. At night a section of Sappers and perhaps two hundred infantry would extend along that tape in silence and by dawn there would be another piece of line to add to the Hun's embarrassment.

Unfortunately the place happened to be "in view," but as neither side will as a rule use artillery on so small a party as two or three, unless they are discovered to be Staff Officers, the only thing that Billie expected was rifle fire, of which the three got more than they really needed. Each had a plan of the work and each knew exactly what was wanted, and after a little while Billie ordered the Corporal into a shell-hole as he found he could manage without him.

"Keep an eye open," he said, "and if one of us goes down, take his place. The last man unhit will carry on with the job. Now, move

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quickly, Bellis, I don't want to give them time to see what we are doing."

But unfortunately they did see because, move as quickly as you can, a good telescope will explain to the other man just exactly what you are trying, and after about five minutes a shrapnel shell burst twenty yards in front of the white tape and scattered the ground with variously shaped bits of steel and iron. Billie frowned and waited for the next, which burst in due course about twenty yards behind.

"Bracketting!" he said. "The next will get us! Slip into a hole." And before the next shell burst, right over the Line, Billie and 869 Sapper Bellis had disappeared to hear the hum of shrapnel pass over their heads as they crouched low, their steel helmets turned east as though in prayer.

After one or two more the Hun stopped for want of a target and Billie, crawling into Bellis's shell-hole, lit a cigarette.

"The devil of it is," he explained, "that they

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have got the range and will keep it, so when Mr. Carstairs comes out to-night with number two section there won't be much work done."

Bellis whistled a bar or two from "Wings," the R.E. "March Past," and said, "Tell you what, sir! You and Corporal Hope crawl out another hundred yards and start it again. I'll keep the blinkin' 'Un busy 'ere!"

Billie peeped over the edge to see what the ground in front was like, and said, "That's a stunt. I'll do it. But I think you'd better come with me and let Corporal Hope 'keep them busy,' as you say."

"Beg your pardon, sir," Bellis answered, "but 'e's married and not over quick on his feet."

"I thought you were engaged," Billie said, smiling. "Don't you remember the little girl in the Tube?"

"That's right, sir," Bellis answered, "I'm engaged to be married when 'we've licked the 'Un and not a blinkin' minute sooner. That's understood."

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Billie thought of his scene with Doris and put Sapper Bellis another two points up in his estimation.

"All right," he said, "get back and fetch Corporal Hope and be careful how you go. If you get hit it will be harder work for me, so don't forget!"

"That's all right, sir!" Bellis answered, melting into the grass with little rushes from one bit of low ground to another. After a short time Corporal Hope and Bellis reappeared and Billie said, "Now don't you play the fool, Bellis, and if you hear a shout it means that one of us is hit and you must come up and carry on."

Bellis waited till they had got well forward and then getting on to his feet walked deliberately down the tape. The country was not badly damaged but about thirty yards further on there was a hollow, and Bellis, as he heard the whine of a coming shell, thought of a game of musical chairs he had played in London on leave. If he got there first it was

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his chair, and if he did not, Billie would have so much less chance of tracing out a new Line. So he sprang off the mark like a sprinter and fell into that hole with a chuckle. It was his chair that time, and Mr. Impett and Corporal Hope could creep forward through the grass with safety.

Then, by the skilful use of ground and a lot of crawling, he appeared on the extreme edge of the Line where they had first started, and paced along the tape, standing upright and saying, "One, two, three, four, that's four yards, five, six, seven, and 'ere's another blinkin' shell and no chair 'andy! 'Ave to chance it!"

Billie dismissed Bellis from his mind and, on hands and knees, pegged out a new Line on the 'skeleton' principle, putting in pegs without using a tape and getting along at high speed. Later in the day, when dusk had fallen and a man was invisible at three hundred yards, a tape could be run round these pegs in no time.

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Once he turned and saw Bellis pretending that he had entangled himself in the tape, in imitation of a clown last seen at the Blackpool Tower Circus, and then as a shell whistled overhead the landscape was empty of all but a tree stump from behind which a whisp of something white fluttered in the wind.

“Got any more pegs ? ” he asked.

“Only a few, sir. We used a lot at the other place.”

Billie had not thought of that. Of course you could not peg out two Lines with the normal supply for one. “Crawl back to Bellis and see if he has any,” he said, “and don’t show a finger till you get well away from here. They mustn’t spot this place.”

Corporal Hope snaked his way west, and just as he was wondering how much further he had to go, looked over the edge of a shell-hole to see Bellis trying to put a field-dressing on to a weasel.

Just at first he thought it must be some silly dream till Bellis said, “ ’Old still, you’re

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in the Dressin' Station. Shouldn't wonder but what you'd have bled to death ! ”

“ He wants some pegs,” Corporal Hope said, “ have you got any ? ”

“ 'E wants *one* peg,” Bellis answered, “ because I've 'ad to amputate a limb with my jack knife, but 'e can 'obble on three. It's one more than I've got, anyway ! 'Old still, will yer ! I never seed such a restless feller ! ” Then, as the Corporal showed signs of impatience, Bellis went on, “ Met in the same shell 'oles 'alf a dozen times, dodging the same blinkin' shells, and sort of made friends. But 'e's a vicious pal, ain't you, Algy ? 'Tried 'is teeth on 'is nurse 'e did, and not the first one as 'as done it neither. I 'eard my mother talking about me 'oncet and——”

“ You'll hear Mr. Impett talking to both of us if you don't wake up,” the Corporal remarked, slipping into the shell-hole. “ Have you got any tracing pegs ? We've run out and Mr. Impett sent me back.”

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“Any amount ! ” Bellis answered, stuffing the weasel into a pocket. “ Give us that bag, Corporal, and I’ll bring you as many as you want.”

Corporal Hope handed over an empty sandbag and went east more or less invisibly.

“ Pegs ! ” Bellis said to the weasel, as he took it out to examine the dressing, “ didn’t I spend an hour drivin’ them into the ground a while back ? ”

After he had pulled up a dozen pegs, a bullet came so close that he moved the weasel into the other pocket of his tunic and looked east.

“ ‘Ere ! ” he said, “ respect the wounded, will yer ! ” but as his advice was not taken he lay down and wondered what the man looked like who was shooting at him. “ Well, of course, he doesn’t know about Algy,” Bellis said to himself, “ mustn’t blame him for that,” and crawling along he drew peg after peg, leaving the tape carefully in position all along the Line, till he thought he had enough.

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When he started to go forward, however, the trouble began, because there was no doubt whatever that he had now been spotted by at least three snipers, and above all things he must not draw attention to Billie's real Line a hundred yards east. That meant that never once must he raise his head, and as there was no sun it was impossible to be sure of the direction.

After crawling for what seemed too long a time he put a hand in his pocket to feel Algy slip out through a bitten hole and escape.

"'Ere!" he said, but Algy had gone and Bellis lay staring at two spots of blood, one behind the other, that showed where the weasel had scuttled over the chalk to his right.

"Attempted desertion!" Bellis said. "Where's 'e gone?" and turning aside he crawled along, following the piteous little trail that showed so clear. He would try a few yards, anyway, he

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thought, and then get off in the right direction again.

Presently, however, he came to a red stain the size of a shilling which made him stop. "Restin'," he muttered, "poor little chap! 'e must be near done! That weasel doesn't rest for nothin'. The dressin's come off, that's what's 'appened. I'll 'ave to catch him now wherever he's gone to. Mr. Impett would do the same 'imself!"

Algy's rest, however, must have benefited him, for Bellis crawled and crawled along the trail, dragging his rifle and cutting his hands, for so far that he began to despair, and just at that moment he heard voices a few yards in front.

"Get your hand right over his head," Billie was saying to Corporal Hope, "and he can't bite. Hold still, old man. I won't hurt you. There you are now, that's all right!"

Two more shrapnel shells sang west and burst over the deserted tape line, and 869 Sapper Bellis crawled on to the scene and

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pushed forward a sandbag half full of pegs.

“ ‘E went on in front, knowin’ the road,” he explained, “ I daresn’t look up and get my bearin’s,” and Billie said, “ I see ; well, let’s go on and finish this Line ; another half-hour should do it if we hurry.”

The miracle of the thing, the utter impossibility of it having happened, troubled none of the three, in fact the only one who was perhaps a little puzzled was Algy, who feeling very faint and delightfully warm where Bellis’s heart pulsed up against the tired little beast, went gently off to sleep.

About eleven o’clock that night 869 Sapper Bellis reached out in the dark for a tiny fragment of bully-beef which he passed down under his blankets.

“ ‘Ere, don’t snatch ! ” he said. “ You ’aven’t got no manners ! ” while away out in the open 2nd Lieut. Carstairs, number two section of the Stickers, and two hundred of

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an infantry working party, dug the new switch line and laughed as they heard shell after shell, most beautifully ranged, burst all along the place where the Hun imagined they would be !

Chapter XV

The Conscript

THE Stickers had always prided themselves on having been twice mentioned in despatches before the passage of the Military Service Act and looked somewhat askance at more recent arrivals, but a time came, of course, when drafts from England contained what were then known as Conscripts. Still later on the number of men who had been compulsorily enlisted, or had voluntarily joined up just in time to avoid the title, grew so big that people forgot all about such things and put everyone on the same level. But until a new draft found their feet there was apt to be a queer line drawn between them and the old hands.

What made matters worse was that as compulsory enlistment came into force, it happened sometimes that a unit previously recruited from "working men" was reinforced

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by drafts of a higher standard of education, which led to a still further separation between old and new. Unfortunately this is a thing over which officers have no control, and it worried Captain Hoyle to see the dwindling number of old hands keeping noticeably aloof from the rest of the company.

"Look here, Sergeant-Major," he remarked one day, "who are you going to put in the Orderly Room to replace Smith? Let's have a man of some intelligence this time."

"That's the difficulty, sir. You can't find a man among the old hands who is good at clerking and figures and such things. As for keeping the Pay Rolls, they can't do it, sir."

"Well, get a new hand," Hoyle answered, "the work must carry on. Besides, there won't be many of the old hands left soon."

"Very good, sir," the Sergeant-Major said. "I'll put Sapper Garnett in as Orderly Room and Pay Clerk. You'll make him Acting-Corporal, sir?"

"Yes," Hoyle answered rather regretfully, "I hate to put these new men over the heads of

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men like Bellis and Mason and Kay, but it can't be helped."

So Sapper Garnett was duly paraded, and after a rough inspection pronounced good enough, promoted Acting-Corporal with two stripes on his rather-new uniform, and installed in the Major's Orderly Room.

In the afternoon while waiting for tea, Sapper Kay aired his views under a waggon to a select audience of old-timers.

"Did you ever see the like?" he said. "'Ere's a chap as stays behind earnin' money all through both Wipers shows, through St. Eloi, the Bluff, Hill 60, and Hooge, and then he comes along 'ere and some one says, 'There's a good man! Let's make 'im a blinkin' Corporal,' and true enough they do. I'm 'anged if I understand it."

Sapper Bellis, who was cutting a miniature trench with his jack-knife to turn the water away on to his neighbour's land, said, "Well, that's 'ow it looks, of course, and there's no denyin'. All the same, it's 'Oyle as 'as done it and I 'aven't seen 'Oyle do any-

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thin' wrong yet ; that is, not as I can remember."

No one answered that because it was true, and Bellis added, in a friendly tone, "'Ave you, Will ? "

Kay, who knew the question was inevitable, had his answer ready. " Well, now that you come to mention it, Tom, I don't know that I 'ave ! Perhaps you'll speak to Mr. Impett when you get a chance."

" Aye ! " Bellis said slowly, " and perhaps I won't ! "

" Well, if he 'adn't been such a blinkin' kid I'd 'ave blacked 'is eye last night," Kay went on, referring to the new Corporal. " Told me as it was difficult for a feller to talk properly about wages, wages, mind you ! unless he 'ad a groundin' in political economy."

" Did 'e for sure ! " Bellis said soothingly. " Must be a bit of a scholard. Anyway, you didn't 'it 'im, so you aren't under close arrest waitin' a court martial. Let's get our tea." From all of which the Company gathered that 869 Sapper Bellis did not consider it wise to

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show any sign of resentment at the new promotion. Yet if anyone had asked that gentleman why he was supporting Corporal Garnett, he could have given no reasoned answer.

All that Bellis knew was that it was Captain Hoyle's doing, and he had not seen Hoyle make any mistakes with regard to the Company so far. He might do in the future, but, on the whole, the betting was against it, besides which Bellis was one of many thousands of Lancashire men who know their own jobs from A to Z and gave everyone else credit for similar efficiency in their own particular line. A shipbuilder was a shipbuilder, and a "scholard" was a scholar of sorts, and both could exist together in the same world.

Days went on and Corporal Garnett tried slowly to find his feet. With the newer men he had no difficulty at all, but a sort of hedge of experience, a time-created barrier, stood ever between him and the old hands. Not

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that they were insubordinate, but their advice in reply to some of his orders was apt to be condescending at times, and Corporal Garnett was worried.

Of course it would have been simple to use his authority, tick one of them off in the presence of his friends, and watch for an indiscreet word in reply coming under Section 40 of the Army Act, but Garnett knew instinctively that that was wrong.

Once he took Bellis on one side and asked him what was the matter but learned nothing. "Stick to it, lad," Bellis said, "another twelve months and we'll all be under the sod. There's nothin' wrong with you as I know of ; carry on as you're goin' ! "

All the same Garnett continued to worry, and after a while came to believe that Sapper Kay was at the bottom of the trouble. He was too polite, for instance, and more than once had indulged in deadly sarcasm clever enough to avoid a challenge under King's Regulations ; so coming back from a kit inspection one afternoon Garnett took Sapper

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Kay on one side and sat on a fallen tree.

“Look here !” he said, “what have I done wrong ?”

“Oh ! nothing, Corporal,” Kay answered with exaggerated politeness, “how could you ?”

Garnett smoked a cigarette for a minute. Kay seemed impossible. At last he concluded he was on the wrong line and said, “Kay, if I wasn’t a Corporal I’d ask you to come the other side of that house and give you the best hiding you ever had in your life ! Do you understand ?”

Sapper Kay gasped. Garnett, the Conscript, talking of giving *him* a hiding ! “Stand up, Corporal, and let’s ’ave a look at you !”

Garnett stood up, half a head short of Kay and probably a three-inch less reach, and after a good look Kay said, “Aye, but you see you *are* a Corporal, and that’s what keeps your blinkin’ teeth in your head.”

Corporal Garnett took a step forward, and then remembered himself. “All right, Kay,”

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he remarked, "I won't forget that insult," and walked back to the billet where he met Bellis cleaning his boots.

"I've had a row with Kay," he said, "and I want your advice."

"Crime 'im," Bellis answered unsympathetically. He hated being dragged into other people's troubles.

"It's not that kind of a row," Garnett explained, "it's personal."

Bellis looked up under a pair of comical eyebrows. "Is there a girl in it?" he asked, but Corporal Garnett ignored the question.

"I told him just now that if I wasn't a Corporal I'd give him a damned good hiding; and so I would!"

"You'd what!" Bellis asked in astonishment, putting a boot down on the floor. "You'd give Will Kay an 'idin'? You?"

"Yes," Garnett said, "I would."

"You couldn't," Bellis said. "You couldn't, really. Don't try it!"

"All right," Garnett answered, "now listen. My father died when I was four years old and

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left my mother and me to shift for ourselves. I had to go to a charity school and when I left with a scholarship I had 'charity' thrown in my teeth. It wasn't my fault, was it?"

Bellis sat up straight and looked the other over in a new light. "No, it wasn't," he replied, "who said it was?"

"No one said it," Garnett went on, "but they hinted it. They did what Kay does. They didn't make any definite charge, they only sneered, the worst charge of all!"

"By Cripes!" Bellis said, "but that's so. What did you do?"

"I fought them," Garnett said viciously. "fought them nearly all. I knew nothing about fighting and got licked week after week, but they grew tired of it in time and left me alone. Then I got another scholarship and moved on."

Bellis whistled an air and scratched the back of his head. It seemed that in a difficulty of this sort there was only one solution.

"Go and tell Mr. Impett," he said, "and say you've 'ad a talk with me. Will Kay'll

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never believe you can lick 'im till you've done it."

Next day as Hoyle was writing up the War Diary of the Company, Billie strolled in and sat down.

"Sorry to interrupt you, sir," he said, "but I want to talk about Corporal Garnett."

"Go ahead!" Hoyle answered, and Billie did for a matter of five minutes.

"That's all right," Hoyle said at last, "but if I reduce him to the ranks, and it will have to be published formally in orders, and if he then gets a licking from Kay, which I'm sure he will, I can't possibly put him back again as a Corporal, and as it happens he's the best Orderly Room Corporal we've ever had. I don't like risking it."

"That's all right, sir," Billie explained, "I've fixed it. You can drop him down in to-morrow's orders and put him back the day after. I'll promise you it will be all right, sir, and it's worth the trouble in the interests of

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the Service. As things are at present I don't like them."

"All right," Hoyle said at last, "but I'm trusting to you, Impett; if he lets us down I shall be vexed."

So Billie said, "Thank you, sir," saluted, and went back to Sapper Bellis who was hanging round outside.

"Now look here, Bellis," he said very clearly, "if Kay licks Corporal Garnett, Captain Hoyle will be vexed with me. Do you understand? Not disappointed, but vexed."

"You needn't worry, sir," Bellis answered, "I'll see as 'e does nothin' of the sort. Tomorrow afternoon, three o'clock, other side of the Old Mill."

What Bellis actually said to Sapper Kay was never known, but that gentleman sailed into a bare-fist scrap in a most uncomfortable frame of mind. Suppose he hit the blighter accidentally, he thought, and knocked him out, that would not be his fault,

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and yet Bellis said Mr. Impett would get into real trouble so that he, Kay, would have to ask for a transfer. There would be no other course open. To live without the intimate taciturnity of Bellis, or the special smile of Billie, was unthinkable. So he shook hands with his opponent much as a man handles a new-born baby, and for the next three minutes tried to remember what he had to do.

Sapper Kay was no skilled boxer but he knew when he had met something awkward, and at the end of the first round he said to Bellis, who was his second, "You'll 'ave to let me 'it 'im soon, Tom, or something'll 'appen. I'm not going to be 'ammered for nothing!"

"You can try a gentle one now and then, Will," Bellis answered, "but you've got to lose anyway so what's the good of worrying?"

"Why the——"

"'Ere, chuck it," Bellis said, "it's your own blinkin' fault and you've got to pay for it. If you licks 'im you know what'll 'appen to you, and I know what'll 'appen to me ;

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and we can guess what'll 'appen to Mr. Impett."

"Well, I'll give 'im one for a keepsake," Kay said, "and then lie down and make out as I've fainted," during all of which the late Corporal Garnett was weighing up the situation.

Kay was certainly heavier, and his extra reach was a nuisance, but, not knowing about Bellis' instructions, he could not understand the other man's failure to follow up one or two openings. If it was skill in avoiding a possible trap that was one thing, but somehow he could not believe it was ignorance.

The timekeeper called "Time!" and the second round started with a smash on Kay's mouth which made Bellis gasp. If Will Kay lost his temper all sorts of things might happen. Then after some close fighting Kay, with his mouth full of blood, decided that it was about time that he asserted himself if only for a moment, and watched for an opening.

Unfortunately, however, Kay's intentions

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and resolves were all interlaced with a horrible dread of the disaster that would follow from an accidental victory, and it was while he was hesitating whether or not to take a palpable opening that Garnett, in deadly earnest, got in a left on the jaw which put 629 Sapper Kay W. out of action for the afternoon.

Bellis watched his pal counted out, said, "Well, I'll go to 'ell!" and then, in the delight of success, walked across to Garnett who was standing rather nervously by his opponent.

"We've got some tinned salmon," he said, "and if you'll come along in about 'alf an hour we'd be glad of your company. Will 'ere'll be all right in a minute and 'e wants you to join us. You see you'll be a Corporal again to-morrow so we must make best use of our time," to which Garnett, sucking his broken knuckles, replied, "I'll come with pleasure; I hope Kay isn't hurt; do you think it's all right now, Bellis?"

"Right as rain," Bellis answered, "just

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you tell us who's givin' you any trouble in the future, Corporal, and that'll be the last you'll 'ear of it."

"I see Garnett is put back as Corporal again," the Major remarked next day, "it doesn't look over well to keep chopping and changing like that," and Captain Hoyle said, "Sorry, sir, it was my fault and it won't happen again."

Chapter XVI

The Brasserie



ONE night, because the Canadians in a fit of zeal started an unadvertised bombing stunt, the Hun jumped to wild conclusions and plastered the country with shells in a most lavish fashion, so that Number One Section of the "Stickers" came back at 4 a.m. minus several Sappers, a Corporal, and 2nd Lieut. S. B. Deane, and the Major told Captain Hoyle to get another Subaltern.

"Who were those two boys you spoke about, Impett, was it the twins?"

Billie frowned a little and then said, "Oh! the Babes in the Wood! Bird and Leigh, sir, but they've got to go together; you see they're a pair."

Hoyle asked the Major if he objected to a supernumerary officer and on getting the reply wired the C.R.E. asking that the Babes in the Wood might be sent forthwith;

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and about a week later Bird and Leigh arrived.

They were met by Billie, taken in hand, and gradually worked into the general machinery of the Company, and as Leigh was "odd man out" he was allotted to Billie's section as a sort of general assistant.

"We're going up to the Brasserie again to-night," Billie said, "and the Hun has been lobbing stuff over the ridge lately, so it may not be nice."

Leigh's eyes lighted up, and he asked if there was anything special he could do.

"Yes," Billie answered, "take care of yourself. In England, perhaps, it doesn't matter, but a wounded officer here is a nuisance." So Leigh plodded up the road with mixed feelings. While he was in England his perpetual worry had been that when he got to France he might not be considered sufficiently brave and so be returned as not wanted, but here was 2nd Lieut. W. R. Impett, who had been mentioned in despatches, warning him to take care of his skin.

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As they passed the wood on the ridge something lit the country for a fraction of a second so that Leigh asked, "What's that?" and Billie started to say, "Direct hit on the Brasserie," but was interrupted by the sound of the explosion. Then a sort of backwash came down the road consisting of all those men whose duties did not actually tie them to the spot, and Billie said, "Go and look after the rear of the Section, Leigh. I may have to move off the road. Don't want to get mixed up with this crowd."

For another fifty yards Billie tried to work forward, but a gap coming in the hedge he said, "This way, boys," and walked into the field. There was no doubt whatever that the Hun had got the Brasserie all right, for as the R.E. Section picked their way over ditches and through reserve wire entanglements, in and around the one-time comfortable rendezvous, shell after shell dropped, burst, and scattered earth, bricks, or fragments of trees, according to its particular landing-place.

Then a badly ranged high-explosive shell

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cleared the buildings and burst about thirty yards in front of the Stickers, so that Billie halted the section.

"That's a nuisance," he said. "All our stuff is in there and we must get the trench frames even if we leave the rest till to-morrow. I wonder where exactly they are. Generally put them in the yard, don't they?"

Leigh, who had come up to see what was wrong when the section halted, said, "Shall I go and see, Mr. Impett? Which side is the yard gate?"

"No, thanks, Mr. Leigh," Billie answered, smiling, "that wouldn't be taking care of yourself, would it? By James, that was a good one! The roof's gone!"

"She'll be alight in a minute, sir," Leigh said, "I can smell the smoke here. There she goes!" and a flicker of flame showed up, died out and then appeared again in earnest, but at that moment a message came up from the rear that the "Senior R.E. officer was wanted on the road." So Billie handed the section to Leigh for a moment and went along to

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talk to an R.A.M.C. Captain who said he wanted help.

“I’ve got thirty wounded in the dug-out this side of the building,” he said, “and they’ll be burned or smothered in an hour.”

“That’s too bad,” Billie answered, “and I’ve got about fifty trench frames in the yard and they’ll be burned too.” The remark was quite unintentionally callous. “Are they all stretcher cases? All actually on stretchers? Well, I’ll do what I can. What’s the entrance like? usual awkward steps?”

“No, it’s a slope,” the other replied, “not difficult at all. Every man’s on a stretcher and you’ve only got to pick them up and come away. I’ve got a score of cases out here that I’m patching up. The dug-out’s full.”

“I see,” Billie said. “Well, I’ll try.” Then it struck him that he was talking to a senior, and he added, “Sir.”

By this time the buildings were well on fire and he could pick out individual N.C.O.’s and men in the red light.

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"Fall out on the left the following!" he yelled, "Corporal Kent F., Second Corporal Spencer R., Sappers Bellis, Kay, Clarke, Mason, Snow, Dudley, Sutcliffe, Templeton, Needham, Roe, Blamey, and Crook!"

That gave a dozen sappers and two N.C.O.'s, which seemed enough to risk on such an errand, but just as the chosen fourteen had fallen out with sundry subterranean jests, Sapper Pobjoy came up, saluted, and said, "Beg your pardon, sir, but I think you've forgotten. You didn't pick me last time when we closed the breach at Bois Carrée."

Billie thought for a minute, remembered that ghastly business, and said, "Didn't I, Pobjoy? I'm very sorry. Well, fall in, you can be spare man to the team."

"There's a ditch and bank this side," he said, after explaining what was wanted, "and that's our headquarters. Once over the bank you've only the road to cross and you're into the dug-out. Move off in order of seniority and go over in pairs at intervals of a minute. We mustn't block the entrance."

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Each man not actually working will keep down behind the bank; they're putting a lot of stuff over, both shrapnel and high explosive. If any man gets hit from his own damned carelessness I won't take him out on a stunt like this again. There's no earthly reason why you shouldn't do it without a scratch, and if I find a man standing about on the road I'll send him back to safety."

The injunctions were so exactly like Billie, and so after the heart of the party, that someone laughed and then pretended to have a cough as Corporal Kent turned his head.

"You will wait here with the remainder, please, Mr. Leigh, and, of course, if anything happens you are in charge." Then turning to his little squad he said, "Just come along here a minute," which the Major would certainly have stigmatised as a most un-military command.

Billie had not picked old hands because he could not trust the others, but because there is a general experience among such men which leads to automatic organisation, the

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most efficient and reliable property that troops can possess, and with very little further instruction the stretchers came one at a time out of the dug-out, with an occasional accident, and were passed over the bank to comparative safety.

After about ten minutes, as Billie was watching a stretcher coming carefully up the incline to be rushed across the road, he heard one of the Sappers remark, "Just let me catch you standing in the road, Jim Dudley, and I'll report you to Mr. Impett!"

Billie did not see the gist of the remark at first till it occurred to him that it was meant for a reproof, so with a little laugh he walked into the dug-out for safety.

By this time five of the rescue party had been hit and the rate of removal began to slow down, so Billie lit a cigarette and chatted with the nearest wounded man. There were only two left now and when Bellis and Kay bolted into the dug-out, Billie said, "Only one more, boys; send across and get him and we'll take the whole lot back to the Section."

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Then as the stretcher went up the slope he turned to the other casualty and saw that a blanket, carelessly thrown, was covering half the man's face.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't notice!" and as he made it right, stood straight up and said, "Dick Barrett!"

A pair of pained eyes opened at the head of the stretcher, and Private Barrett R., of a certain Home Counties Regiment, said, after a little pause, "This isn't chance, Impett! It's been arranged somehow. I'm going in a minute or two and you were the one man on earth I wanted to see."

"You're going out of here," Billie said, "that's all!" Dick Barrett tried vainly to move his head, and as the two men looked at each other a high-explosive shell burst inside the Brasserie wall, and brought it all down with a roar on to the dug-out.

Billie was thrown to the ground and groped about for the lamp, which, of course, had gone out with the shock. When he got it lit again he gazed at the roof timbers and saw that

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they were holding, though an ominous deflection gave a hint of the strain.

Barrett, who to Billie's horror had apparently noticed nothing, went on, "The one man I wanted to see, and you've come. Don't interrupt, Impett, I haven't much time. I wanted to say good-bye to Doris before I left but I farked it. Do it for me like a good fellow, and look after her, Impett, look after her!"

Billie held his hand out in silence but Barrett whispered, "I can't move. I'm going in a minute. Don't wait here, Impett. It's all right now. I wanted to see you and you came. It's awfully good of you. Good-bye, and say good-bye to Doris for me, will you? Thanks!"

Dick Barrett's eyes closed very, very slowly and Billie, quite unable to speak, got up to go out on to the road but found the exit blocked by a mass of brick and stone that spread about two yards into the dug-out, while at the same time a haze of smoke which he had tried to ignore, grew more intense and he began to cough.

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Two Sappers dropped over the bank and gasped, "He's buried! They've fetched the blinkin' wall down on the dug-out and you can't get near it for smoke!"

"Double back some one and fetch Mr. Leigh!" Corporal Kent shouted. "Come on, boys," and what was left of the party jumped out on to the road, while Bellis, who had very clear ideas as to what was wanted, said, to Sapper Kay's astonishment, "All right, I'll go back, Corporal!" and fled away to the Section.

"Mr. Impett's compliments, sir," he rapped out to Leigh, "and will you please bring the whole Section up at the double as 'e's buried in the dug-out and bein' choked!"

Leigh, if he speculated at all, must have pictured Billie tapping the message through the wall of sandbags, like some unfortunate fellow who had fallen into an oubliette, but as everyone within hearing had jumped to his feet, that young man found himself doubling up behind Bellis as No. 4 Section of the Stickers went swiftly into one of their grimmest adventures.

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Before the main wall of the building had gone there had been a certain amount of protection from shrapnel, added to which the full glare of the fire now flung straight across the road, so that even the grass on the bank was burning in places.

"Can't work more than six men across there, sir," Bellis said. "We'd better go and see how many are left and keep the rest under the bank 'ere to replace casualties." Then, while Leigh weighed the thing up, Bellis added, "There ain't a blinkin' feller in this Section as would go back to billet without 'im!"

"There isn't an officer either, Bellis," Leigh answered. "Let's go and look."

Once across the road with hands to their faces in a vain attempt to keep off the roasting heat, they found four Sappers tearing away at the debris with curses that sounded suspiciously like sobs, and moved some fallen men out of reach of the raining bricks.

"You can do with two more, sir," Bellis said, "go and get 'em and lend me your

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whistle. Every time a man drops out I'll blow it and you'll send another chap across the road."

"Will I hell!" Leigh answered. "Go and get them yourself; I'm staying here!"

Bellis sent a dozen more bricks flying and then decided that 2nd Lieutenant J. R. Leigh was probably right, besides which he was an officer after all, so he strolled rather theatrically across to the bank and as Leigh's whistle sounded said, "Next for shaving! 'Ere, take your turn! Sapper Clarke, step this way, please!" after the manner of what he generally referred to as an 'Emporium feller.'

After that Bellis divided his time between the blistering heat of the dug-out entrance and the impatient Sappers who crouched behind that friendly bank.

"I'm actin' under Mr. Leigh's orders," he said to the Section, "and the first chap as I catch comin' out of 'is turn will be reported to Captain 'Oyle to-morrow or I'll give 'im

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five bob ! ” Then, spitting on his hand after an old custom and wiping it on his trousers, he added, “ See that wet ? See that dry ? Cut my throat if I tell a lie ! ”

There was no getting away from that. Lies had been sworn on Testaments, and told wholesale in Orderly Rooms, but a statement volunteered on that formula was binding ; so, as every now and then Leigh blew his whistle, so often a man doubled across the road, dragged someone out of the way, and carried on.

Just after a more than usually heavy bit of shrapnel had knocked Leigh’s helmet across the road with a broken chin-strap, someone yelled, “ We’re through ! ” and Leigh fell on to the road with a million stars gyrating before his eyes.

Bellis looked at him, took his whistle as a precaution and said, “ Take ’im away and send ’alf a dozen chaps to collect wounded. It’s all over ! ”

Next morning Leigh and Billie, who slept

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together, happened to wake at the same time and compared notes.

"I've got a devil of a headache," Billie said, "suppose it was the smoke. How are you feeling, Leigh?"

"Oh! I'm all right," Leigh answered. "I've got rather a headache too, but I think something must have hit me, because I came home with some one else's helmet."

Billie sat up and, feeling horribly ill, scribbled a pencil note to Doris.

"I met Dick Barrett by chance last night," he wrote, "and he asked me to say good-bye to you, dear. It seems he didn't like to before he left England. He's gone now, Doris dear, and he thought about you right up to the last minute, so he must have been an awfully decent chap."

Then, after wondering how to go on, he added, "I've got rather a headache, result of too much smoke, I fancy. I don't know that there is **any** other news at the moment."

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Billie stuck up the envelope carefully, and lying back on his improvised pillow said to Leigh, "I think Bird's hanging about outside. If you'd like him to come in I don't mind in the least. I'm going to sleep.

"Hullo, Bellis!" Hoyle said, "do you want me?"

Bellis, looking rather silly, said, "No, sir, that is, not exactly, but, any news of Mr. Impett, sir?"

"Oh! he's all right!" Hoyle answered, "the R.A.M.C. people have sent his name in for a Military Cross, and he and Mr. Leigh have put you down for a D.C.M."

"'E's light-'eaded, sir," Bellis remarked, adding quite untruthfully. "A beam fell on 'im just as we was getting 'im out. 'E'll be all right to-morrow." But as Hoyle only smiled Bellis saluted and went off to his hut.

"A D.C.M.!" he said to the weasel, who

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came nosing out of its box in the corner.
“What d’you think of that, Algy? ’Ere,
keep your blinkin’ teeth out of me! I’m an
’ero!”

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